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**TOWARD A GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF STUDENT  
PERSISTENCE THROUGH LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

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**by**

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**Treatise**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this joint effort to the community college students and their professor who graciously allowed me into their classroom and lives so that I could pursue this research.

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# **TOWARD A GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF STUDENT PERSISTENCE THROUGH LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

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This qualitative study focused on which features of a linked courses model learning community may foster student persistence throughout a semester long course at a two-year institution. The mainstream course, comprised of 17 mainstream and eight non-mainstream students, provided for a natural experimental setting. Strong features of learning communities were explored through various indicators (i.e., student-faculty and peer interactions, shared inquiry and collaborative learning, satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the classroom environments, and how features of this particular linked courses model were reflected in the learning community model adopted by the institution). End-of- year marks plus persistence into fall were compared. Findings failed to support any direct links to persistence. Results indicated, however, both mainstream and non-mainstream students who passed with a “C” or higher possessed what the researcher identified as an “economy of ambition,” characterized by an ability to merge personal and academic lives and schedules successfully. Positive student traits included being goal-oriented, self-motivated, flexible and adaptive to their academic and

campus environment. Social integration and inclusion (e.g., social events or participation in campus-wide groups) were not priorities for both groups. Non-mainstream students expressed more positive perceptions toward social acceptance in the non-mainstream classroom due to its smaller size. Thus, heightened peer interaction, a main feature of learning communities, influenced positively students' socialization experience that led to study partnerships, which may have fostered student persistence. Non-mainstream students were motivated, in large part, because of their shared academic goals, and these partnerships would not have developed or been possible in the larger mainstream environment. Both mainstream and non-mainstream students represented a wide range of ages and ethnic backgrounds. The majority felt reluctant to speak up as participants in the mainstream classroom of 25 peers. Academic involvement (i.e., clear expectations from the teachers, detailed syllabus, handouts, and in-class exercises) was a priority for both groups. Overall, both groups appreciated contact with their instructors and expressed a strong commitment to second semester persistence. In addition to analysis of the interview data and strong participant observation throughout the semester, institutional data were analyzed. Findings failed to support any institutional outcomes-based measures dealing with behavioral outcomes except for support for pursuit and attainment of a degree, in particular for part- and full-time developmental (remedial) and first-time-in-college students (FTIC).

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Introduction and Overview.....	1
Historical Perspectives .....	4
Purpose of the Study .....	8
Research Questions.....	11
Definition of Terms.....	12
Overview of Methodology .....	16
Significance of the Study .....	18
Limitations and De-Limitation .....	18
Assumptions .....	20
Summary .....	20
Organization of the Study .....	21
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature.....	24
Introduction and Overview.....	24
Brief History of the Community College .....	25
Aims of Developmental Education .....	27
Philosophical Shift From Remedial To Developmental Education: Deficiency Theories and the Under-Prepared Student ...	28
Student Persistence, Student Involvement, and Student Engagement in Higher Education .....	31
Research and Theories on Student Persistence .....	33
Tinto's Integration Model, Astin's Involvement Theory, and Astin and Panos' Theory of Progressive Conformity .....	34
Learning Communities: Coalescing Fragmentation in Higher Education, Revitalizing the Classroom, Creating Faculty Renewal.....	36
Coalescing Fragmentation in Higher Education .....	37
Revitalizing the Classroom.....	39
Creating Faculty Renewal.....	41



Student Persistence and Learning Communities.....	42
Large Learning Communities and Student Persistence.....	43
Recent Research on Learning Communities in a Developmental Setting .....	45
How Learning Communities and Research on Learning Communities Can Improve.....	51
Summary .....	54
Chapter Three: Methodology .....	55
Introduction .....	55
Qualitative Research Design .....	56
Sample Description.....	59
Sample: (Faculty & Students) .....	60
Initial Faculty Contact.....	60
Student Participants .....	62
Data Collection .....	63
Participant Observation .....	63
Moderate Blend of Participant and Observer.....	64
Semi-Formal Interviews .....	65
Setting for Interviews .....	66
Rationale and Description of Interview Protocols .....	67
Data Analysis.....	68
Qualitative Criteria.....	68
Summary .....	71
Chapter Four: Findings.....	72
Introduction and Overview.....	72
Summary of and Rationale for Methodology .....	72
Overview .....	73
Participant Screening and Selection.....	77
Qualitative Interpretative Analysis: Coding the Data.....	79

Context of the Study .....	81
Characteristics of Student Interviewees .....	81
Ethnic Background .....	81
Marital Status .....	82
Education and Employment of Parents .....	83
Education and Developmental Education Backgrounds Of Interviewees .....	84
Employment Status of Interviewees, Educational Goals and GPA Average.....	84
Portraits of Student Interviewees.....	85
Mainstream Student Participant Profiles .....	85
Bonnie .....	85
Laurel .....	86
Manuel .....	86
Raul .....	87
Shakira .....	87
Oralia.....	88
Soon Yi.....	88
Angela .....	89
Beatriz .....	90
Non-Mainstream Student Participant Profiles .....	90
Hae Jung.....	90
Penelope .....	91
Trey .....	91
Rosa.....	92
Mariposa.....	92
Faculty Participant Profile .....	93
Professor Johnson .....	93
Findings.....	94

Social and Academic Involvement Themes Identified by Interviewees in Mainstream and Non-Mainstream Classes.....	95
Mainstream Classroom Environment Themes .....	95
Non-Mainstream Classroom Environment Themes .....	95
Social and Academic Involvement Themes Identified by Interviewees in Mainstream Classroom Environment .....	96
Theme #1: “I’m Running to My Next Class or Going to My Job” .....	96
Theme #2: I’m Always Studying When I’m Not Working” .....	98
Theme #3: “The Learning Labs Are a Life-Saver” .....	100
Theme #4: “I Should Just Raise My Hand and Speak Up in Class But I Never Do” .....	102
Theme #5: “Long Lectures” .....	106
Theme #6: “It’s Too Much Information Sometimes” .....	109
Theme #7: “I Wasn’t Prepared for Stuff on the Exam Outside of the Handouts” .....	111
Theme #8: “Students Want to Be Spoon-Fed the Material” .....	113
Theme #9: “Give Us a Worksheet or Homework ‘Cause We’re Just Reading, We’re Not Comprehending” .....	115
Social and Academic Involvement Themes in the Non-Mainstream Classroom Environment .....	118
Theme #10: “I Can Be Myself and Its Comfortable” .....	118
Theme #11: “I’ve Made Friends, and We Study Together Sometimes” .....	121
Theme #12: “I Thought the Psychology Textbook Would Be Branded in My Mind” .....	123
Summary .....	126
Chapter Five- Discussion, Implications, Conclusions, and Recommendations .....	128
Introduction and Overview.....	128
Purpose of the Study .....	128

Research Questions.....	129
Review of the Literature.....	130
Findings.....	134
Social Involvement.....	134
Academic Involvement.....	135
Discussion of Findings .....	137
Research Question #1 .....	138
Indicator #1 .....	138
Indicator #2 .....	140
Indicator #3 .....	142
Indicator #4 .....	144
Indicator #5 .....	147
Indicator #6 .....	149
Research Question #2 .....	150
Implications and Conclusions .....	155
Conclusion #1 .....	156
Conclusion #2 .....	157
Conclusion #3 .....	160
Conclusion #4 .....	161
Recommendations.....	164
Recommendation #1 .....	164
Recommendation #2.....	166
Recommendation #3 .....	168
Recommendation #4.....	168
Scenario One .....	169
Scenario Two.....	169
Recommendation #5.....	170
Recommendation #6.....	171
Summary .....	172

Appendix A: Student Interview Protocols.....	174
Appendix B: Faculty Interview Protocols .....	177
Appendix C: Institutional Effectiveness Measures for Developmental and Non- Developmental Students Plus State-Wide Percentages.....	179
Bibliography.....	181
Vita .....	199

*In the realization of individuality there is found also the needed realization of some community of persons of which the individual is a member; and, conversely, the agent who duly satisfies the community in which he shares, by that same conduct satisfies himself.*

-John Dewey

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

### **Introduction and Overview**

In the field of student persistence in higher education, contributions from scholars and researchers over the last two decades have fallen short on advancing theories of persistence for two-year institutions. Even so, this body of work has identified certain factors that influence persistence. These findings have given policy makers, community college administrators, and faculty good reason to support certain instructional interventions that promote persistence, in particular for incoming freshman.

One effort undertaken over the last twenty years to curb rising attrition has been the introduction of learning communities. First-year seminars and coordinated studies, for example, shift the focus from teacher-centered learning to a student-centered approach that emphasizes collaborative learning. As an instructional intervention, learning communities have gained prominence and momentum (Tinto, 1997, 1998a), but results remain inconclusive and large-scale longitudinal studies are lacking. If learning communities can alter the academic and social climate of the classroom, more research on learning communities may unravel the complexity between student motivation and a

teacher's ability to engage students. This, in turn, may help to develop better retention strategies in the classroom.

In two- and four-year institutions, freshman attrition hovers around 45% and 26%, respectively (Berkner, He, Mason, & Wheelless, 2007; The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2006). Both have made student retention a compelling topic over the last four decades due to rising tuition, economic changes, increasing enrollments, and declining state financial aid. In the 1970s and 1980s researchers and scholars attributed student flight to a wide spectrum of internal and external factors that are still relevant today. These factors include an inability to navigate the system, isolation or fragmentation within the campus environment, family or financial struggles, job-related stress, and inadequate advising or counseling (Noel, Levitz, Saluri, & Associates, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Tinto's (1975) departure model and Astin's (1984) involvement theory remain the most widely disseminated persistence theories in higher education. Tinto (1975) argues colleges should pay more attention to what happens after students enroll than what happened to them previously. As a result, strong academic coherence (integration) and social integration of the student are defining factors within the broad spectrum of college experiences that may help to retain students. Academic integration may heighten student levels of aspiration and academic interest through educational goals that faculty reinforce in the classroom. Student services, advising, and counseling services provide additional support. Social integration means participating in campus-wide activities and events, coherence with one's surroundings, plus involvement in other student-related

programs. Buy-in from students, faculty, administrators, and staff promotes a quality education.

Astin (1984) frames the problem differently, and focuses on encouraging student behaviors rather than creating programs to alter them. Astin's (1984) involvement theory emphasizes strong faculty-student and peer interactions. Although his theory supports a non-interventionist approach, this particular aspect is strongly supported in and akin to learning communities. As an instructional intervention, learning communities can alter student behaviors through heightened interaction between faculty, students, and peers, thereby promoting social networks through shared knowledge and inquiry.

Ideally, learning communities provide an academic and social climate for students to thrive and to persist, particularly for the larger learning communities where a small cohort of students may live together as freshman. Some researchers are quick to point out first-year seminars and Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) cannot be adopted by two-year institutions (Porter & Swing, 2006) because students need to be enrolled full-time, and the majority of students who enroll in community colleges are part-time or commuter students. Nevertheless, 62% of two-year institutions use some type of learning community (Policy Center on the First Year of College, 2002).

The linked courses model learning community is the most basic type of learning community. Some models link two developmental courses; others (the majority) link a developmental course to a credit-bearing course (Tinto, 1998b; Horn, 2000), providing developmental (remedial) students an incentive. This study focused on a linked courses model that combined a credit-bearing and remedial course.



What sets the linked courses model apart from other types of learning communities is a shared syllabus or textbook, in addition to smaller class sizes. Academic and socialization features of a learning community assist students to fulfill their educational goals, which may lead to greater persistence. The student population attracted to a linked courses model is typically the commuter or part-time student. Part-time students comprise 61 percent of the population who attend community colleges (Community College Survey of Student Engagement [CCSSE], 2005). A typical community college enrollee is part-time, is female, has one or more dependents, requires remediation (Brint & Karabel, 1989), and is a single, first-generation student who works at least 30 hours per week to be financially self-supporting (CCSSE, 2005). The majority of students who participated in this study fit this student profile.

### *Historical Perspective*

Communities of learning have their roots in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Meicklejohn's early experimental college at the University of Wisconsin in 1932, Dewey's learner-centered philosophy of education, Freire's rejection of lecture-based teaching (where the student is little more than a spectator), and Joseph Tussman's experimental school at Berkeley in the 1960s provided viable alternatives to the mainstream classroom. These have influenced educational trends towards the student- or learner-centered approach (Marchese, 2000; Spann, 2000). An interest in learning communities returned in the 1990s prompted by state and parental concern over undereducated students and low faculty morale within colleges and universities (Gabelnick, McGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990).

Recent research on learning communities, though limited, has focused on how developmental (remedial) studies programs use learning communities to change a student's academic and social trajectory (Bloom & Sommo, 2005; Tinto, 1998b; Choitz, 2006; Killacky, Thomas, & Accomando, 2002; Barefoot, 2005; Raftery & VanWagoner, 2002; Malnarich, 2005; Grubb, 2001; Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). And, numerous developmental (remedial) education programs have positive correlations to retaining academically under-prepared students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Developmental education programs and learning communities share a common purpose: cognitive and affective growth of the whole individual. Influenced by the work of Dewey, student-centered teaching becomes a focal point for instruction in developmental education and in communities of learning. Given these similar philosophical approaches to pedagogy, the institutional adoption of learning communities in a developmental education setting would seem an ideal match.

Thus, the classroom provides an ideal environment to explore how students involve themselves in their own learning, how teachers reach these students, and the degree to which instructional interventions in the classroom can positively affect the overall outcome. Developmental education programs that utilize learning communities to boost overall retention focus on this very aspect of student education: student involvement in their own learning (Tinto, 1997).

The discourse on student involvement dates back to the landmark 1984 postsecondary education report, 'Involvement in Learning' (U.S. Department of Education, 1984) that focused on the imperiled undergraduate student experience. In

addition, Boyer (1987, 1990) emphasized the critical importance of community in higher education, a strong element to learning communities. How student involvement and motivation fueled learning were major themes for both reports, each concluding that a joint endeavor by faculty and students significantly contributed to student success. Conclusions drawn from both reports suggest that student involvement and engagement are indicators for student success in postsecondary institutions.

Most influential research on student persistence in higher education has overlooked two-year institutions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). The full-time university student is the typical subject of study, and most studies do not consider variables such as race, socio-economic status, and short-term educational goals are not considered, which can weaken a persistence model's predictive powers for two-year institutions (Voorhees, 1987; Ross, 1992; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Rendon, 1994; Padron, 1992; London, 1992).

More recent research conducted on how two- and four-year institutions can promote student success and involvement points to conditions in the environment that signal strong performance expectations from students. This includes student effort, and an environment that may link involvement and success (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2005). A recent 2006 CCSSE report validated findings from their study of 28 Florida community colleges that measured student engagement and involvement as predictors of overall academic success and persistence. The report found that active and collaborative learning were powerful predictors of academic success, degree completion, and attainment; student effort and academic challenge were strong predictors; and

student-faculty interaction was a good predictor (McClenney & Marti, 2006). Why these particular aspects of classroom teaching work are beyond the scope of this study. These findings on student success and degree attainment, however, reinforce how some features of learning communities (e.g., active and collaborative learning, being academically challenged in new ways, faculty-student interaction, and student motivation through shared inquiry to encourage effort) may create conditions to foster persistence in the classroom, in particular for those students who require remediation.

Sixty-three percent of freshman community college students require some form of remediation as opposed to 40% of university students (Venezia, Callan, Finney, Kirst, & Usdan, 2005). These students are at a distinct disadvantage because the more they require remediation, the less likely they are to complete their remedial or developmental studies programs (Adelman, 1999; Astin, 1985; Maxwell, 1979; U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Half of the student populations who require remediation fail to complete their developmental studies coursework (McCabe, 2000). Moreover, about one-half of community college students and roughly two-thirds of students entering universities complete their degrees after three and six years of study, respectively (Berkner et al., 2007; The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2006).

These statistics bring into question whether institutions have given priority to attracting new students at the expense of retaining those who are currently enrolled. This dilemma presents a financial loss to institutions (Cambiano, 2000; Ebberts & Wild, 2002). Accordingly, community colleges that adopt learning communities should be

held accountable. This may translate into a significant time investment by faculty, and ample financial and moral support from the institution. Likewise, any priority established by an institution must be aligned with the overall mission of the school (Alfred, Ewell, Hudgins, & McClenney, 1999; Boylan, 2002; Roueche & Snow, 1977; Roueche & Roueche, 1999). Some of these alignment efforts include community colleges devoting abundant resources to tracking student enrollments, persistence, course completion, and graduation rates that are often tied to state-mandated performance benchmarks (Voorhees, 2001).

While tracking student populations help community colleges to predict enrollments and perhaps meet these particular performance-based outcomes, they fall short in helping community colleges understand what may benefit students directly in the classroom.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study aimed to understand which features of a learning community may lead to greater student persistence and how. Mainstream and non-mainstream (developmental) students were enrolled together in a linked courses model offered at a two-year institution. Both groups of students enrolled in the same credit-bearing introduction to psychology course, and developmental students were enrolled concurrently in a developmental (remedial) reading course. The mainstream course provided a natural experimental setting to understand how features of a learning community may foster student persistence among developmental students in the mainstream course compared to their mainstream counterparts.

This study focused on students' perceptions of academic and socialization experiences inside and outside the classroom(s). Other comparisons were drawn including successful course completion plus persistence into fall. The focus and purpose of this study, however, were not to engage in whether or not developmental students should be mainstreamed. This is a large and controversial subject, and is beyond the scope of this study.

This study used the paired courses model because linked courses may target a specific group of students (i.e., developmental education students). Courses are paired thematically or linked through a shared syllabus. Although both faculty may share curricular materials, they do not co-teach in this model. Students stand to gain from content used from one course to reinforce learning in another subject area. This concentrated effort allows developmental students to pass both credit- and non-credit bearing classes at the same time. Thus, this qualitative study sought also to understand the educational benefits from two courses that share the same textbook: a freshman-level psychology class and a non-credit developmental reading course. The institution's 2005 developmental plan stated shared content and skills as a goal to reinforce learning in all learning communities, one of which was the subject of this study.

For developmental students in this particular two-year institution to be eligible to enroll in a linked courses model, they must have scored within one or two points of passing the reading portion of the state's standardized entrance exam. Developmental students whose scores fell within the range to be eligible to enroll in the remedial exit-

level course would naturally be more qualified to pass the credit-bearing course compared to beginning or intermediate developmental students.

Other linked courses offered by the developmental studies program at this two-year institution included developmental reading paired with history and government classes. Additional offerings included course clusters that utilized developmental level courses in reading, writing, and math with a study skills supplement. According to institutional records and interviews with student participants, the majority of mainstream students were enrolled in developmental math courses at the time of the research, and the majority had developmental histories in reading, writing, and/or math courses prior to being enrolled in the mainstream class. Thus, both mainstream and developmental students' educational backgrounds were similar in this regard.

Specifically, the mainstream classroom was composed of 17 mainstream students with a small cohort of eight developmental enrollees. The 14 student participants who agreed to be interviewed represented a range of ethnicities including Hispanic, African-American, White, and Asian orientations. Out of the 14 students who agreed to be interviewed, three were males. Several older adult females attended school part- or full-time, worked part- or full-time, had families, and were first-time-in-college-students (FTIC). Fifty percent of student participants were first-generation.

Overall, this study gained insights into parallels drawn between mainstream and non-mainstream groups rather than differences. In particular, this study will demonstrate the weight of self-perceived intimidation or embarrassment mainstream and non-mainstream (developmental) students felt in the mainstream classroom that prevented

the majority from participating verbally. In addition, one of the stronger socialization features of a learning community, its small size, and the power of peer interaction and comfort the smaller developmental cohort provided were important elements to student perceptions of personal satisfaction and ease of participation in the smaller developmental cohort.

It is noteworthy that this type of linked courses model should inspire developmental students to continue their studies because passing a credit-bearing course early may motivate students more than if they were enrolled in non-credit developmental (remedial) courses exclusively. Furthermore, a short-term educational goal supports some current criticism of the common definition of persistence in higher education that measures typically degree completion. This approach may be less useful toward an understanding of the nature of student persistence in community colleges because a sizable portion of their student populations have different educational goals and backgrounds from their university counterparts. Thus, this study highlighted some incongruence in theoretical models of student persistence in higher education cited in the seminal literature.

### **Research Questions**

Two major research questions guided this study:

1. Which features of a learning community promote student persistence at a two-year institution during one semester of study?
2. Among students and faculty in this particular linked courses model, are there aspects of student experiences that appear to distinguish those who



complete their coursework with a passing grade of “C” or better from those who fail or drop out?

Five sub-qualifiers were chosen to provide a sound conceptual framework to explore features of a learning community and are listed below:

1. To what extent did student interaction with faculty and their peers, inside and outside of class, play a role in the student’s involvement in their learning?
2. How did collaborative classroom assignments or projects promote shared inquiry, shared knowledge, and intellectual richness?
3. To what extent did students and faculty report satisfaction and success in the learning environment?
4. How did student perceptions of their learning environment shape their affective and cognitive behaviors?
5. How were features of this particular learning community, as reported by teachers and students, reflected in the learning community model adopted by the institution?

### **Definition of Terms**

The following definitions were concepts and terms related to learning communities and student persistence, and therefore were apropos this qualitative study:

1. **Learning community (LC)** –Five typologies of learning communities exist. Intensity of faculty involvement and integration of the curriculum vary, depending on the context. A learning community is a widely accepted term that generally refers to the linking of two, three, or more courses that promote coherence and integration of the curriculum, stimulate intellectual capacity, and promote shared inquiry within a

collaborative setting. It restructures activities to promote positive socialization features in the classroom (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

2. **Linked Courses** – This typology is the most basic of LCs and is identified by the linkage of two courses that target specific students who can pre-register for these courses (e.g., a non-credit developmental course and a mainstream course). In this case, two instructors may share course syllabi, but will teach individually. Course content and skills may in fact be revealed and built upon between the two disciplines, however (Gabelnick et al., 1990). An example of this would be for a mathematics course to help develop musical skills in a music composition course or a business class. Twenty to twenty-five students typically enroll, but the number can be substantially smaller depending on the program.
3. **Course Clusters** – These LCs are linked by semester or by year and are available for students to enroll in a cohort fashion. Course or learning clusters involve a programmatic approach that links several courses or disciplines through curricular themes or strands (interwoven or organized around broad conceptual statements) to promote more depth of knowledge and to ensure that students, peers, and faculty interact on a more intimate and meaningful level through active and robust collaboration (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Lenning & Ebberts, 1999). The level of integration by faculty depends on the institution, however. The number of students in this group setting is not pre-determined but should not exceed more than fifteen to twenty students (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).
4. **Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs)** – These LCs are built around pre-major areas and are especially appropriate for freshmen entering four-year institutions with advisement needs. This particular model is not necessarily characterized by team teaching or an interdisciplinary

approach but generally these features are employed. Twenty to twenty-five students typically enroll.

5. **Federated Learning Communities (FLCs)** – These LCs are geared for students at large research universities to counteract social isolation and fragmentation typical of these large, impersonal settings. FLCs are a larger and more complicated version of FIGs, but with the added feature of a designated faculty member (sometimes called a Master Learner and sometimes relieved for one year from their teaching duties) who moderates a three-credit program seminar for the group of students to assist them. The Master Learner literally becomes a student learner, assuming all tasks and expectations of the students enrolled. Twenty to forty students typically enroll. Another type of learning community similar to FLCs are residential learning communities, which are a dormitory of students (such as entering freshmen) that commit their first year to this type of large cohort experience. The motivation is to improve student retention throughout the freshman year of college.
6. **Coordinated Studies** – This is the most radical rearrangement of the traditional curriculum that embeds elements of integration and interdisciplinary themes throughout the coordinated studies program. Students enroll in coordinated studies for their entire course load for one semester or more. Traditionally, the ratio of faculty to students is 1 to 20 and three or four faculty teach within the coordinated studies program (Gabelnick et al., 1990).
7. **Collaborative Learning** – A feature of a learning community that relies upon mutual exchange and engagement by faculty and students to enhance depth of knowledge and social interaction within the classroom dynamic.

8. **Paradigm shift** – This term denotes a gradual institutional or historical change; a move away from the current trend or dominant school of thought to an emerging design, generally opposite in nature.
9. **Student persistence** - For purposes of this study, student persistence is defined as persistence in the classroom up through the end of a semester or quarter long course, with successful completion of a grade “C” or better. In this instance, student persistence is characterized by what compels the individual to continue pursuit of his or her academic and personal goals within a learning community framework in an institution of higher learning during classroom and outside of classroom activities.
10. **Developmental Education** – The field in higher education that represents the shift in remedial education to consider affective and cognitive behaviors of under-prepared students to educate them in a holistic manner.
11. **Remedial Education** – A term synonymous with the notion of re-educating students in two-year institutions who do not pass basic math, reading, and writing entry assessments in postsecondary institutions. The term “remedial” has fallen out of fashion with the National Association of Developmental Education (NADE) because of its pejorative connotation and narrow pedagogical scope.
12. **Progressive Conformity** – A theory espoused by Astin and Panos in the early 1970s to suggest that individuals essentially conform behaviorally from peer influence. This theory suggests strong correlations to student persistence when students participate in classes with other students who are ambitious and motivated.
13. **Academic integration** – One of two essential features to Tinto’s (1975) departure model that assumes for students to be academically successful and stay in school, understanding the role of being a student and being motivated academically is important to student persistence. These

features are coupled with the school providing strong academic and social inclusion for students, and Tinto's (1975) model is based on the typical university student as the subject of study.

14. **Social integration** – The second of two essential features to Tinto's (1975) departure model that assumes for students to be successful and persist in their studies, they must feel connected and be involved socially. Manifestations range from strong interaction with faculty and peers to participating in campus-wide groups and activities. This model is based on the typical university student as the subject of study.
15. **First-Generation-Student**—This term applies to students who are first in their families to attend a postsecondary institution. More often than not, these enrollees are minorities and come from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
16. **First-Time-In-College (FTIC)**—This term denotes a student's first time enrollment in a postsecondary institution.

### **Overview of Methodology**

A qualitative and interpretive design methodology framed this participant study. As such, how participants structured meaning within their academic and socialization experiences contributed to the essence of this phenomena. Therefore, as co-constructors of reality, the accumulation and discovery of knowledge supported this form of naturalistic inquiry. The essence and heritage of learning communities naturally draw upon Dewey's aims of education that focus on the cognitive and affective growth of students within a holistic framework.

A flexible yet orderly research design (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was employed so that the researcher stood to gain from participants' insights and perspectives during the interview portion of this study, in addition to other data sources. A simple mixed-

methods qualitative approach involved “comparing observational data with interview data” (Patton, 1990, p. 467). This involved strong participant observation in the classroom throughout the course of the semester, tape-recorded interviews from 14 students and one adjunct professor, field notes, classroom artifacts from the mainstream course, a review of the developmental education plan for the institution 2005-06, access to institutional records for end of course marks, developmental histories of students, review of other pertinent documents (i.e., brochures about learning communities and the course catalogue), and informal conversations with individuals who worked directly with students. This included a counselor, a learning lab manager, and an administrator who provided institutional effectiveness data. In addition, informal meetings with four faculty (three full-time and one adjunct instructor) who have taught for years in other learning communities on different campuses took place over the course of the semester.

Faculty insights and historical knowledge brought forth a relevant historical background on how learning communities began, how the institution adopted the model, in addition to insights into their experiences and differing points of view, which established a method for comparative analyses. This type of analyses helped demonstrate the additional time, effort, and dedication exhibited in other types of linked courses models and course clusters on different campuses at the same two-year institution.

The sampling was nonrandom and purposive: the researcher chose to study student participants and the adjunct instructor from the mainstream psychology course that was part of a linked courses model offered in a large Texas community college. The

class size was not large by traditional standards, which ensured more in-depth interviewing and direct observation. Students in the linked courses were not statistically representative of the demographics of the two-year institution, but students were statistically representative of the majority-minority status of the state. Prior to the 15 tape-recorded interviews, the mainstream instructor was contacted by the researcher with permission granted from an associate vice president of the community college to request participation in this study with the intent to observe and participate in the classroom throughout the semester. Students enrolled, however, were not contacted initially prior to this research undertaking.

### **Significance of the Study**

Success in learning communities has been characterized by collaboration, involvement, and interaction from all participants. Two-year institutions stand to gain from listening to voices of faculty and students, a primary motivation for this research undertaking. Results from this qualitative research should: (1) inform pedagogical practice to foster student persistence in a learning community, (2) increase the knowledge base about student persistence in general, (3) provide value and features of the teacher-student relationship and peer-to-peer relationships within the context of a learning community and a mainstream class, and (4) modify perceptions about traditional four-year student persistence models applied to two-year institutions.

### **Limitations and De-limitations**

The inherent shortcomings from a positivist perspective for any qualitative research undertaking were that it limits one's ability to generalize or validate one's findings, in

particular when the sample size is small (Becker, 1958; Astin, 1969; Bogdan, 1992; Crotty, 1998; Hatch, 2002). However, because meaning is derived from the nature of qualitative research, and not causality or prediction, this limitation was warranted (Bogdan, 1992). Additional relevant limitations and de-limitations were noted in regard to this qualitative research:

1. Time constraints created a de-limitation. This research involved one semester at a community college instead of researching faculty and students for a full year, or at multiple institutions, which would yield better data (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005).
2. This qualitative research is predicated upon the intrinsic value of perceptions in qualitative research (Bogdan, 1992; Hatch, 2002; see Strauss & Corbin, 1998), a limitation in interpreting outcomes or causality.
3. Although the researcher diligently avoided any researcher bias about students and faculty in learning communities or institutions that support learning communities, it was the view of this researcher that learning communities, when implemented well, do offer students a quality learning environment and an academic experience that may be richer and customized to address the range of student needs. Therefore, in every respect, to expect a completely objective and non-biased research process was, at best, idealistic, a further limitation.
4. Strong participative observation of mainstream and developmental students in a credit-bearing course as part of a linked courses offering was a strong methodological feature of the research design, but other credit-bearing courses offered within this type of learning community model on the same campus were not observed. This de-limitation reinforces how reliance upon a single study limits generalizability



because the environment becomes a constant rather than a variable (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Astin, 1969).

### **Assumptions**

How knowledge is acquired, interpreted or understood is a complex phenomenon. Furthermore, “one’s intrinsic assumptions are embedded in one’s theoretical perspectives” (Crotty, 1998, p.7). Features of a learning community were assumed to be a strong contributor to student success. In particular, it was assumed that socialization features would appeal to developmental students due to the smaller class size of the developmental reading class.

Moreover, it was assumed faculty and students participating in a learning community model wanted a challenging, satisfying, and enriching academic experience, if given ample opportunities to that end. It was assumed the institution maintained support of and fidelity to the overall concept of learning communities in support of students’ diverse needs. A program evaluation was not the purpose of this study, however. In addition, it was assumed faculty had a keen understanding of collaborative learning and pedagogy, interdisciplinary teaching, and integrated lesson planning as needed.

Finally, it was assumed participants contributed responses in an honest and forthright manner.

### **Summary**

In light of remediation needs of more than half of students entering our nation’s two-year institutions, a better understanding of the nature of student persistence in

community colleges should be a priority for faculty, administrators, and leaders who understand and recognize the urgency to increase completion rates of students in developmental education programs, and all course completion. This study offered important insights on linked courses models where credit- and non-credit bearing courses are combined because this type of instructional intervention may inspire developmental students to persist in their studies where content and skills are shared to reinforce learning in the mainstream course. Furthermore, because of the growing debate about the high numbers of students who do not complete their developmental coursework, research in the classroom becomes all the more important.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study is divided into five chapters and is designed to help increase, formally and informally, knowledge about the research topic that reveals valuable information regarding the research questions posed.

Chapter One gave a brief summary of the challenges community colleges face with regard to under-prepared students enrolling in these institutions and problems of persistence and completion of degrees in higher education today. Within Chapter One, learning communities are introduced as an instructional intervention to foster student persistence in a classroom setting.

Chapter Two, a review of the related literature, provides a brief history of community colleges and a portrait of the under-prepared student. The philosophical shift from remedial to developmental education is highlighted because of common philosophical aims under girding developmental education and learning communities. A

brief discussion of theories of student persistence, engagement, and involvement usher in a brief history of learning communities as an instructional intervention to address retention and persistence problems. Finally, the lack of research on learning communities and research on learning communities in a developmental setting is significant, and some of the more recent research in this field will be highlighted.

Chapter Three includes the research design and rationale for employing strong participant observation, the description of the sample (participants), and the procedures for data collection and data analysis used to explore student persistence as they relate to student involvement in a learning community model. Features of learning communities examined included student collaboration and interaction with faculty and peers, student and faculty satisfaction in the learning environment, collaborative learning and shared inquiry, and elements of the linked courses model that match the overall learning community model adopted by the institution. Briefly discussed are validation processes and methodological limitations. Interview protocols for the interviews are included in sections A and B of the Appendix section.

Chapter Four presents an introduction and overview of the findings, the context of the study, interviewee characteristics, and analysis of the findings. Included in the findings are researcher observations, reflections, and judgments from strong participant observation in the classroom including analysis of artifacts.

Chapter Five concludes with an analysis of the results presented in Chapter Four. This includes implications that stress the need for theoretical models of persistence to include two-year institutions. Additionally, conclusions are drawn from the lack of

fidelity to the model adopted by the institution within the linked courses model that was explored. These conclusions reinforce the need for future research on the effectiveness and implementation of learning communities as viable alternative instructional interventions for under-prepared students in two-year institutions.

*Education, someone remarked, is what stays with us after everything we were taught has been forgotten.* – Max Lerner

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Introduction and Overview**

To frame this study, the related literature is examined from three perspectives. First, a brief history of the community college is given with a focus on the philosophical shift from remedial education to developmental education because of mutual goals between developmental education and learning communities. Second, research on student persistence in higher education and attendant theories of student persistence are examined. Theories of student persistence, student involvement, and student engagement in an organizational setting can broaden our conceptual framework, but with the caveat that theories that have been advanced have used primarily the typical university student as the unit of analysis. Although this predominance suggests a need for a retention theory for two-year institutions, for purposes of this study, a review of these theories may expand our abilities to analyze problems and foresee solutions in the area of overall student persistence within the broad categories of academic and social integration, which are features of learning communities. Third, because the multiple roles of learning communities in higher education can provide some necessary solutions (e.g., addressing fragmentation at the institutional and programmatic levels, improving faculty morale, and motivating student interest in learning), these features are highlighted. Some successful learning communities programs are discussed, and the last section addresses a

lack of research on learning communities in developmental education, while providing observations to improve research in this field.

### *Brief History of the Community College*

Community colleges comprise a vast segment of American higher education with the first “junior college” having opened its doors in 1901. The Truman Commission on Education created in the early 1940s established “locally-controlled colleges so all citizens could benefit from at least two years of postsecondary education” (Malnarich, 2005, p. 51). In the 1960s, a community college opened its doors every week (O’Banion, 1997) to students who could either not afford to attend university, were denied access because of low academic standing, or wanted to pursue technical or vocational training, an area ignored by mainstream postsecondary institutions.

Selective admissions by universities in the 1960s bolstered the “open door” policy of community colleges. By 1968, most community colleges offered some type of remedial education including courses in reading, math, and English (Roueche & Snow, 1977). Up until 1973, the community college was about the only place a disadvantaged student could get a postsecondary degree (1977). Furthermore, the development of community colleges has rested upon democratic principles of equal opportunity and “maintenance of democracy” (Roueche, 1968, p. 7). “Community colleges have become the primary vehicle for upward social and economic mobility for the lower two-thirds of the population (Roueche, 1972, p. 9). Therefore, community colleges have served as a formidable democratic vehicle to promote equal opportunity for our nation’s citizenry over the course of the last century.

Brint & Karabel (1989) emphasize the inherent contradiction regarding the multiple roles of the community college:

To extend opportunity and to serve as an agent of education and social selection, to promote social equality and to increase economic efficiency, to provide students with a common cultural heritage and to sort them into a specialized curriculum, to respond to the demands of subordinate groups for equal education and to answer the pressures of employers and state planners for differentiated education, and to provide a general education for citizens in a democratic society and technical training for workers in an advanced industrial economy. (pp. 9-10)

Public two-year colleges account for “over one-quarter of all higher educational institutions in the United States, numbering 968 in 1989 (Dougherty, 2001). Today, 1202 two-year institutions comprise about 46% of our nation’s colleges (Pascarella, 1999). Dougherty (2001), Eaton (1994), Smith (1994), and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement [CCSSE] (2005) describe today’s community college student as typically minority, female, low-income, working class, noncredit, and older than traditional college age. In addition, today’s community college student often comes from “impoverished neighborhoods, poorly funded schools, and curriculum stripped of its academic content” (Malnarich, 2005, p. 52). First-generation students also comprise a significant portion of community college enrollment (Malnarich, 2005; CCSSE, 2005).

A breakdown of the ethnic background of students enrolling in community colleges reveals that “sixty percent are white non-Hispanic, 23 percent are African American, and 12 percent are Hispanic. Fifty-four percent have an annual family income of less than \$20,000” (McCabe, 2000, pp. 4-5). A little more than 50% of students are under the age of 24, and slightly less than 20% of students are over the age of 35 (2000).

Although the focus of this study is not socio-economic or race-related factors that may contribute to retention, access, and degree completion, these statistics are noteworthy. Student access and degree completion are highly correlated to income and race (Bailey, 2005). “Access has improved but not completion rates for two year degrees and transfers to universities by minority, low-income and first generation students” (p.1). Over half of African Americans “who enroll in community colleges drop out of school within six years” (p.1). For these students, the stress of working plus providing for dependents may prove too much beyond certificate programs (2005). Twenty-three percent of first-time enrolled Whites earn an associate’s degree within six years, compared to 10% for Blacks and 18% for Hispanics. The rates of completion for bachelor’s degrees are much lower for ethnic minorities. Two percent of Blacks and five percent of Hispanics complete a bachelor’s degree in the same time frame. Twelve percent of Whites earn the same degree over a six-year period (2005).

#### *Aims of Developmental Education*

Community colleges enroll large numbers of students who do not possess the reading, writing or math skills required of postsecondary institutions. Community colleges—the de facto repository for remedial education—bear enormous responsibility for educating our future citizenry with selective states mandating remedial education as their exclusive responsibility (Roueche & Roueche, 1999). Although more than half of the states introduced legislation to abolish remedial education programs between 1990 and 2000, 27 of those states stopped passage of this legislation (Hamilton, 2001). South Carolina has mandated remedial education be taught exclusively in community colleges,



and Florida currently places statutes on time and funding of remedial education programs (Roueche & Roueche, 1999). Eleven out of 44 states have mandated remedial education to community colleges (1999).

While many states allocate resources for remedial education programs, a number do not. According to Perin (2006), state funding of remediation programs, however, should be required. McCabe (2000) suggests community colleges must raise the skill level of entering students to maintain their quality programs. Although 95% of community colleges offer some type of remedial or developmental education courses, many of the programs remain poorly funded and staffed and do not receive institutional and administrative support needed for these programs to be successful (McCabe, 2000; Roueche & Roueche, 1993).

*Philosophical Shift from Remedial to Developmental Education: Deficiency Theories and the Under-Prepared Student*

Roueche & Snow (1977) and Boylan (2002) criticize the practice of institutions that isolate developmental education programs from academic disciplines, counseling, and advising departments. Rather, alignment of the curriculum and integration of the developmental studies program into the other academic departments is essential for student outcomes and success.

The pejorative connotation of the term *remedial* fell out of favor in the 1970s, generally because of the inadequacy of the programs (Roueche & Snow, 1977; Roueche, 1972). Kozeracki (2002) argued the labeling implied that repairing students was in

order. Educators advocating for this change ushered in a mantra: educate the whole child in a holistic manner (Roueche & Roueche, 1993; Boylan, 2002).

As a result, researchers and practitioners in the field of developmental education felt the need to characterize more favorably the under-prepared student (Boylan, 2002; Bailey, Leinbach, Scott, Alfonso, Kienzl, & Kennedy, 2004; Bailey, 2005; McCabe, 2000; Roueche & Roueche, 1999; Roueche & Snow, 1977). Roueche & Roueche (1999) and Boylan (2002) observe a more holistic approach to education should include attention to affective and cognitive behaviors and mental wellbeing, important considerations toward student engagement and educational outcomes. Studies conducted in the early 1970s by Cross (1971, 1976) concluded that best practices included building beyond skills in reading, writing, and mathematics.

Proponents of change in community colleges posit that if students are taught holistically, they will perform better (Moore, 2006). The problem many teachers face (notwithstanding overpopulated classes) is striking a balancing between the necessary repetition and drill against teaching the whole student. This includes the wide spectrum of critical analysis, ideas, and arguments that can empower individuals to move beyond their self-perceived potential (Baker, Roueche, & Gillett-Karam, 1990).

Moore (2006) implores us to consider that critical thinking skills and nonacademic support in the learning environment are usually not a priority: minorities are often warehoused to prevent them from attaining bachelor's or higher degrees, given their disadvantaged and low-income status. This is not an unfamiliar social criticism in higher education. Panos (1973) found that remedial education (known as compensatory

programs in the early 1970s) was a “deficit model of education” (Panos, 1973, p. 440) used to segregate Blacks from their White counterparts. Further research from Panos (1973) suggested success of compensatory programs for Blacks was far from conclusive, a sentiment echoed in general about remedial education from Roueche & Snow (1977), Roueche & Roueche (1999), and later Boylan (2002). Grubb & Associates (1999) reiterated the deficiency model of education and the “language of deficiency” (p. 31) as being common in developmental and remedial programs.

Focusing less on racism or pejorative terminology, Smilkstein (2003) focuses on cognitive ability and learning theory. Similar to Dewey, Smilkstein (2003) equates learning with practice and reiteration up through mastery, but with rich curricular opportunities to make those fundamental learning moments purposeful and meaningful. Panos (1973), decades earlier, saw the same interests, motivations, and attitudes that the learner could bring to the environment, which, ideally should be integrated into all learning experiences because “the individual’s capabilities are the raw material which the institution must cultivate and develop” (p.444). From a curricular perspective, this philosophy linked curricular design and curricular alternatives to the goals of the developmental student (1973). This philosophy of education resonates with the philosophy of learning communities, which is highlighted in a subsequent section.

*Student Persistence, Student Involvement, and Student Engagement in Higher Education*

Educational attainment in two-year institutions compels us to consider how postsecondary institutions promote learning and shape the lives of students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2005). The subject of student persistence in higher education has gained prominence from researchers, theorists, and practitioners in the field (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Tinto, 1998a). There is voluminous research on student persistence at four-year institutions (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Tinto, 1997, 1998b, Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, Kuh et al., 2005), and four-year institutions dominate the field of theoretical research on program effectiveness, student retention, persistence, and course completion (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Choitz, 2006).

The fields of student persistence, student-centered learning, and student engagement have mutual aims: enhancement of student life and improvement of student work. From the four-year institutional perspective, academic preparation and motivation are the best predictors of student graduation (Adelman, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Kuh et al., 2005). Kuh et al. (2005) link what “students *do* during college” (p. 8) as mattering more to their persistence and learning than where they are from or where they go to college. Student learning is affected by “institutional environments that are perceived by students as inclusive and affirming and where expectations for performance are clearly communicated and set at reasonably high levels” (p. 8). In Chickering & Gamson’s ‘Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education,’ strong factors for student motivation and engagement include student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on

task, high expectations, and respect for diverse talents and ways of learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Kuh et al. (2005) emphasize that student success and student engagement are the responsibility of higher education institutions, and higher education must embrace the notion of documenting effective educational practices (DEEP).

Although DEEP schools (their research has identified twenty two- and four-year institutions combined) have in place highly functioning various programs and practices that support outstanding performance, the “*numbers* of students touched in meaningful ways by one or more [programs], the *quality* of the respective initiatives, and the *synergy* and *complementarity* of these efforts that create a success-oriented campus culture and learning environment” (Kuh et al., 2005, p. xvii) contribute to the institution’s success. Furthermore, if student engagement leads to student persistence, then

...student engagement has two key components that contribute to student success. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success. The second is the ways the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities. (p. 9)

Additional studies on engagement in two-year institutions have found similar results. In a three-year study of 447 institutions in 46 states, surveying 246, 548 students, The Community College Survey of Student Engagement *Act on Fact: Using Data to Improve Student Success* (2006) found that community college students are much more engaged inside the classroom than outside. Results of this study indicated that student behaviors that promote persistence include more faculty interaction with students, more

collaborative and project-based learning in the classroom, more time spent pursuing active learning rather than rote memorization, more time devoted to class preparation and study, and greater communication availability between adjunct faculty and part-time students. Although not complete, this study brings alignment of student engagement measures with institutional effectiveness practices. The large body of research in the fields of student persistence, student involvement, and student engagement for four-year institutions has similar findings (Tinto, 1975; Astin, 1984, 1985, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Neumann & Neumann, 1989).

#### *Research and Theories on Student Persistence*

The majority of research in the area of student persistence and effectiveness programs is predominantly from four-year institutions where a full-time traditional student is the unit of analysis (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). In the 1990s a large volume of research relied upon “theoretical models of student persistence” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 396) to demonstrate a statistically significant net effect of both college conditions and student experiences on retention and persistence. Although limited, some research exists on the nature of student persistence in an academic setting (Tinto, 1997). Several studies by Tinto (1975), Tinto, Goodsell, & Russo (1993), Bean (1983), and Pascarella & Terenzini (2005) reinforce the strong relation of these variables below to overall student persistence up through degree completion:

Academic performance; specific, academically-related experiences (such as Supplemental Instruction, first-year seminars, academic support programs, advising, and undergraduate research experiences); financial aid; interactions with faculty members; inter-actions with peers; residence; learning communities;

academic major; general academic and social integration; and intercollegiate athletics. (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 396)

*Tinto's Integration Model, Astin's Involvement Theory and Astin & Panos' Theory of Progressive Conformity*

Theoretical models on student persistence are reinforced through studies that demonstrate greater involvement by students through academic and social integration. The study of the academic and socialization aspects of students and faculty, inside and outside the classroom (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1987, 1994), may lead toward a greater understanding of student involvement and persistence in that environment. Tinto's (1975) departure model posits institutions should commit to academic and social integration of students to see net gains in persistence and overall retention rates. Specifically, Tinto's integration model is a function of three elements: (1) formal and informal social and academic integration, (2) skills preparedness for students, and (3) a sense of belonging and community felt by the student. Ross (1992) and Pascarella & Chapman (1983) assert, however, Tinto's model lacks predictive power or applicability to community colleges due to the commuting nature of two-year institutions, which gives students less opportunities to integrate both academically and socially. Other scholars cite weaknesses to the model because it ignores the plight of the minority students enrolled in postsecondary institutions, and does not make appropriate considerations for their struggles (Rendon, 1994; Mohammadi, 1996).

Astin's (1984) involvement theory reinforces direct energies by the student toward his or her own learning. Increased retention may be a result due to the student's personal investment combined with support by the institution. An additional element to

involvement theory is how to *encourage* student cognitive and affective behaviors rather than superimposing certain programs to elicit certain behavioral change. Additionally, Astin (1984) cites specific external support systems that may influence student persistence outside the classroom: campus activities, campus living, and intercollegiate sports. Faculty and peer interaction, however, is considered one of the strongest features of Astin's model.

Some of the seminal research on persistence suggests instructor skills may impact student behaviors toward better involvement (McKeachie 1994; Smith, 1980). However, Tinto (1997) finds this area of research debatable. Additional factors to be considered that influence persistence are peer interaction and regular contact with faculty (Endo & Harpel, 1982). Tinto (1997) suggests that the “greater [the] students’ involvement in the life of the college, especially its academic life, the greater their acquisition of knowledge and development of skills...this is particularly true of student contact with faculty” (p. 600). With relation to peer influence, peer interaction has direct effects on student persistence and it is a “powerful socializing agent in shaping persistence and degree completion” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 418).

Progressive conformity, a theory espoused by Astin & Panos (1969) suggests a causal link between student persistence and peer influence due to the average educational aspirations of peers in their particular majors. This concept appears to drive changes in students’ values, beliefs, and aspirations (Astin, 1993) because the “dominant peer group both encourages homogeneity and discourages heterogeneity” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 419). Although far from conclusive, the effect of peer interaction on



one's educational aspirations has its grounding in features of socialization (McKormick, 1997). Astin (1987) and Tinto (1997) underpin the notion of a shared and connected learning experience with peers positively affecting student performance. In addition, Pascarella & Terenzini (2005) find that students' perceptions of faculty being invested personally in a students' education contribute to a positive and statistically significant net effect on student persistence. Pascarella & Terenzini (2005) cite additional studies that establish some linkages between a student's perception of faculty concern and interest in the student, which influences positively student persistence. This research remains largely inconclusive, however.

*Learning Communities: Coalescing Fragmentation in Higher Education, Revitalizing the Classroom, Creating Faculty Renewal*

The beginning of the 1900s saw the rise of experimental colleges that advanced communities of learning and integrated curriculum. Meiklejohn (1932) saw the experimental college he created as integral to intelligence training, to skills development, and to the preservation of humanity. Joseph Tussman's experiments at Berkeley in the 1960s reinforced the philosophical roots for the learning community, which rested on the work of John Dewey. His mistrust of the institutions themselves and faith in learner-centered education was the crux of Dewey's work. Believing in learning through doing, Dewey (1938) reinforced "development from within" instead of "formation from without" (p.17) to teach in a holistic manner. In addition, Freire (1970) criticized the orthodox style or banking style of education, which limited the relationship between student and teacher to little more than a student being a repository for

knowledge with teacher acting as a depositor. Both educational philosophies of Dewey and Freire, in addition to influences from the experimental colleges of Meiklejohn and Tussman, contributed to the rise of the learning community and its holistic approach to teaching.

### *Coalescing Fragmentation in Higher Education*

Another important consideration to learning communities is how society influenced its resurgence since the time of Tussman's experimental college. The early 1990s saw state and parental complaints of undereducated students coming out of colleges and universities, and disgruntled and apathetic faculty (Gabelnick et al., 1990), which provided an opening for a renewed effort toward systemic change:

The learning community reform effort is distinctive in its focus on *structural* barriers to educational excellence, pointing to the structural characteristics of many colleges and universities as major impediments to effective teaching and learning. Large, impersonal, bureaucratic, and fragmented, the American college is often an educational community in theory only...with huge enrollments, diverse students and faculty, competing missions, an increasing number of part-time faculty and students, and enormous specialization and fragmentation in the curriculum, many institutions are not experienced by students or faculty as an educational community at all. The college experience is sandwiched between work and family, and the set of classes taken during any given term constitutes the only sustained contact students have with their colleges. Learning communities are a structural response to this fragmentation. They try to establish conditions that promote coherence, community, and a sense of common purpose in an institutional environment otherwise characterized by social and intellectual atomism and fragmentation...they address issues of student retention, active learning, and faculty development. (pp. 9-10)

Hill (1985), as cited in Gabelnick et al. (1990), reinforces how learning communities can address certain institutional challenges:

On our campuses, we need associative educational structures that build significant educational dialogue...the university and college are set up to discourage communication across the boundaries and to discourage people from having time to talk to each other...fundamental to all this work is building the opportunity to work together, to learn from each other, and to release the powers of human association...because we have been living in a too isolated and atomistic way...if you create these opportunities and make them real and reward them, then a tremendous amount of creativity comes forth and people start to learn again and to feel excited about their work. (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 86)

Palmer (1999) and Schneider and Schoenberg (1999) call for educational renewal through learning communities. However, due to atomistic elements of departments and the lack of membranous relationships between departments, the task to implement learning communities can become overwhelming. Laufgraben Levine & Shapiro (2004) articulate logistical considerations with questions posed such as : (1) How will interdisciplinary classes be structured within academic departments? (2) How will faculty load be counted, and (3) What individual oversees or supervises the learning community program? In point of fact, additional complex factors exist that may derail learning community efforts (Bauer, 2005). This includes improper funding, lack of time, poor coordination of scheduling, lack of faculty buy-in, lack of professional development, and undedicated students.

Shapiro & Levine (1999) and Laufgraben Levine & Shapiro (2004), known for their extensive work in learning communities, focus primarily on four-year institutions. Their research, however, does highlight some successful learning community programs in community colleges.

Daytona Beach Community College, La Guardia Community College, Seattle Central Community College, Northampton Community College, Capital Community

College, and William Rainey Harper College are highlighted. La Guardia Community College has the longest history of using learning communities. Beginning in 1971 with liberal arts clusters, their program has grown to include freshman interest groups (FIGs). One of the strongest features of the learning communities at La Guardia Community College is integration of the curriculum and support of developmental student needs because many students come from international backgrounds (Laufgraben Levine & Shapiro, 2004). In addition, The Evergreen State College, a small public liberal arts college, is renowned for its learning community programs, and the National Learning Communities Project holds annual summer institutes on The Evergreen State College campus.

### *Revitalizing the Classroom*

Over the last decade, the concept of the learning community has become more and more embedded in student learning, performance, and overall growth (Shapiro & Levine, 1999), which has crept slowly into the fabric of mainstream classroom teaching as an alternative to individualized learning protocols (1999). A reconstitution of the traditional classroom environment through a learning community can

...purposefully restructure the curriculum to link together courses or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students...learning communities are also usually associated with collaborative and active approaches to learning, some form of team teaching, and interdisciplinary themes (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 5)

Collaborative learning is supported in the literature through Tinto (1975) and Astin's (1984) integration and involvement models, which share the philosophy that direct

student involvement, shared inquiry, and knowledge may improve retention rates. One important arena that addresses academic weaknesses and/or psychological and emotional needs of the student is this collaborative learning model (Tinto, Goodsell, & Russo, 1993; Tinto, Goodsell Love, & Russo, 1994) because learning communities offer linkages between “increased student involvement in learning and higher levels of student motivation” (Stark & Lattuca, 1997, p. 256). A shared and connected learning experience amongst peers, students, and faculty should lead to greater persistence. Because the social, psychological, and academic needs of the student should include reinforced goals with peers and a deeper connection with faculty, the learning community can reconstitute these academic and social aspects of the traditional classroom (Sanchez, 2004; Minkler, 2002; Matthews, 1986, 1988-1989; Tinto & Russo, 1994; Lichtenstein 2005; Horn, 2000; Ross, 1992).

However, Tinto (1997) suggests that within the collaborative learning model, student ownership of their learning may contribute to higher levels of persistence. From a social integration standpoint, collaborative learning is student-centered, which can provide strong linkages to student involvement and ownership of student learning, which promotes student persistence and overall retention (Tinto, 1997; Tinto, 1998a, 1998b, Tinto, Goodsell & Russo, 1993; Tinto, Goodsell Love & Russo, 1994; Tinto & Russo, 1994; Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Minkler, 2002; Malnarich, 2005; Choitz, 2006). In sum, curricular integration, a main feature of learning communities, can build positive socialization features in the classroom through shared knowledge, shared inquiry, and shared learning (Tinto, 2002).

### *Creating Faculty Renewal*

Direct benefits to students from learning communities assume that faculty are engaged equally in the process, and institutional support systems are in place to develop faculty skills. This includes support of best practices, better curriculum design, and successful coordination of the program (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Ideally, learning communities can reinvigorate disgruntled or silo-based faculty giving them a new sense of shared purpose (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Laufgraben Levine & Shapiro, 2004). Through collaboration, faculty can gain a fresh sense of purpose toward teaching, and a renewed sense of coherence with students through rethinking the curriculum (Lenning & Ebberts, 1999; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Laufgraben Levine & Shapiro, 2004).

Malnarich (2005) reinforces the structural benefits of learning communities. Their purpose is to restructure the student's time, to restructure the curriculum for integration of knowledge and skills, and to create community between students and faculty. Ideally, greater interaction amongst student, peers, and faculty to promote shared inquiry is a hallmark of learning communities (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). That teachers and students work together to achieve a better understanding of the material heightens the intensity of the collaboration.

In sum, the following fundamental attributes of learning communities include:

- A focus on the cognitive and affective behaviors of students.
- A vital link to the community college for part-time students who cannot participate in the more traditional social organizations or performing groups on campus.

- A social network comprised of faculty and peers to cope with daily stress from jobs or from a non-supportive family background.
- An intellectually rich learning environment from the linking of disciplines that is revealed through shared knowledge, which provides deep connections for students.
- Maximization and optimization of a student's learning ability (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999), and "faculty revitalization." (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 5)

### *Student Persistence and Learning Communities*

Linkages between quintessential learning strategies of the learning community and the students' persistence in that environment are not yet distilled into a clear and concise formula for practitioners, administrators, and researchers to rely upon at both two-year colleges and universities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Furthermore, theoretical links between learning communities and student persistence are less prominent in some of the seminal research in the learning community literature, which focuses more directly on learning communities as a critical response to multiple levels of fragmentation in higher education, and less as a panacea to retention.

A potential outcome, however, from learning communities is increased student persistence because its attributes are aligned with the broader undergraduate reform initiatives that focus on community and engagement (Kuh et al., 2005; CCSSE, 2005, 2006). This emphasis offers a salient framework to address social and academic integration, a strong feature of student involvement (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1994, 1997, 1998a, 1998b), which is reinforced by features of learning communities that foster

positive linkages to persistence and overall retention (Tinto, 1997; 1998a; 1998b; Tinto & Russo, 1994; Tinto, Goodsell & Russo, 1993; Tinto, Goodsell Love, & Russo, 1994; Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Minkler, 2002; Malnarich, 2005; Choitz, 2006). Within this discussion, however, it is important also to consider how education seems always to be in a period of reform (Northcutt personal communication December 14 2006).

### *Large Learning Communities and Student Persistence*

Although a voluminous amount of literature addresses student persistence in colleges and universities within the context of student persistence, institutional characteristics are considered too big, cumbersome, and ill-defined to support a strong statement of impact by these factors. The larger impact or influence may well reside “within and not between categories of institutions” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 395). However, Titus (2004) contends that selectivity, as measured by the average student’s capacity to perform academically at a four-year institution, may have a positive net effect on persistence more than student-level predictors.

Studies from the pre-1990s “produced the strongest evidence” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 421) of residential and participative learning environments that positively influenced student persistence. Called living-learning centers (LLCs), these residential co-living and co-learning arrangements “blurred the boundaries between students’ academic and social lives...[through] a rich residential setting that included faculty participation and academic and cultural programs, as well as academic advising, mentoring, and an on-site classes” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 421). LLCs were considered precursors to learning communities. There is some evidence to suggest a



positive correlation between the large residential learning communities and student persistence, but the majority of the research “is largely silent on the impact of these [learning] communities on student persistence and degree completion” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 422). Findings are suggestive rather than conclusive.

Today, nationwide, colleges and universities offer large learning communities as part of their offering, in particular to freshman students (Porter & Swing, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Gabelnick et al., 1990). To retain students and to address some structural fragmentation, 77.3 % of the largest research institutions offered learning communities to first-year students (Policy Center on the First Year of College, 2000). Single cohorts of students enrolled in classes together that were linked thematically across the curriculum. Today, first-year seminars are the most common type of learning community on university campuses (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Policy Center on the First Year of College, 2002). Institutions supporting student-centered learning believe the first year of college has become the time during which many colleges and universities offer a variety of special curricular initiatives designed to promote higher levels of academic engagement, a greater sense of community, and academic support (Policy Center on the First Year of College, 2002).

Given the capacity for institutions to develop community, Rendon (1994) criticizes the nature of postsecondary institutions with their focus on Euro-centric curriculum, and a frenzied focus on outcomes rather than learning processes. Although employing learning communities to address diversity issues is not a focus of this study, Della Piana (2001) reported on a learning community program that saw statistically

significant net gains in persistence and graduation rates for students of color at The University of Texas at El Paso. In this instance, learning communities provided a strong resource for majority/minority states where access and additional support systems for minority students were needed. Much research and literature is devoted to how learning communities can address social isolation and fragmentation of students of color (Laufgraben Levine & Shapiro, 2004; Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

Because seminal research on student persistence and learning communities focus primarily on university research and scholarly work, we look to other scholars to fill the gap in the research. This subsequent section provides some research that focuses specifically on both effectiveness programs in developmental education programs and several learning communities at various two-year colleges nationwide.

#### *Recent Research on Learning Communities in a Developmental Setting*

The positive net effects of a learning community in a developmental education program would appear on the surface, quite natural, given that both fields serve as intervention strategies to address challenges and barriers students face that prevent student completion of educational goals. Both developmental education and learning communities have their grounding in cognitive psychology. More important, each intervention focuses ideally on improving the lives of students tied to “cognitive and intellectual development” (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 17). Roueche & Roueche (1977) weigh the significance of the cognitive and affective behaviors that must be addressed in developmental education, a similar focus for learning communities:

Developmental cannot be characterized by a limited definition of verbal and quantitative skill remediation for the low-achiever. It spans a wider base. It signifies efforts to take a student from where he is to where he [and she] wants (needs) to go, and efforts to provide both the academic and the human skills to make that movement. (Roueche & Roueche, 1977, p. 1)

In 'How College Affects Students,' Pascarella & Terenzini (2005) listed developmental education under the category of programmatic interventions relegated to two paragraphs. However, Pascarella & Terenzini (2005) cite the research of Boylan & Bonham (1992), Budny, (1994), Campbell & Blakey (1995 and 1996), Easteling, Patten & Krile (1998), Garcia (2000), Hector & Hector (1992), Robbins & Smith (1993), and Weissman, Silke, & Bulakowski (1997) as seminal research in the field of developmental education that establishes evidence of positive linkages from developmental studies to short and long term student persistence and retention for at-risk students. As cited by Pascarella & Terenzini (2005), Campbell & Blakey (1996) and Weissman et al. (1997) report the first semester is principally important.

But specific research conducted on developmental studies programs using learning communities as a programmatic intervention is lacking from this influential research conducted on two-year and four-year institutions. Horn (2000) describes the difficulty in conducting research in developmental education programs because of the complicated nature of the lives of these students, which "make it difficult to create true matched comparison groups and easy to attribute negative results to the resulting design flaws" (p. 58).

Since Horn's (2000) research on learning communities in developmental education, more single case studies have been conducted. Malnarich (2005) reports the

effect of learning communities as successful intervention strategies to support supplemental instruction with the conclusion that community colleges can address the deficiencies of under-prepared students through a robust interdisciplinary curriculum:

...Spokane Falls Community College's (Washington) "Learning How to Learn" [learning] community began with a link between its developmental study skills program and a difficult transfer-level biology course...Fayetteville Technical Community College (North Carolina) created an integrated module for introductory algebra and basic chemistry to stem the high failure rate in these developmental courses. (Malnarich, 2005, p.55)

In addition, Malnarich (2005) reported dramatic improvements in student persistence and retention in learning communities at Fayetteville Technical Community College, and his description of the overall mission of the programs is noteworthy:

Developmental learning community programs that are respectful of students' circumstances, supportive of their educational aims, and thoughtful about the purpose of education can be extremely effective in helping developmental students achieve their educational goals. (p. 51)

Along these lines, Choitz (2006) reported that "Although community colleges experience significant need for developmental and remedial education, little evidence points to successful intervention strategies. However, one strategy has been evaluated and shows evidence of success: learning communities" (p. 13). Wilson (2005) created (from an extensive literature review) a survey of advisors and working groups in successful online developmental education program offerings that included "faculty involvement throughout the whole process [and] learning communities" (p. 10). Faculty who lead developmental education programs need institutional support: Neither instructional strategies nor program design strategies [such as learning communities, author added this for emphasis] will gain significant traction in the absence of strong

leadership and institutional commitment to support and strengthen developmental education programs (Choitz, 2006, p.13).

Community colleges need to employ various and creative strategies to reduce attrition problems, and research is an important counterpoint to these undertakings. Horn (2000) advocates for research on learning communities in developmental education programs because learning communities call for a rethinking or recalibration of teaching and learning in the classroom. Since the 1990s, a growing body of literature exists on learning communities that

...have discussed the implementation of learning communities and described students' and instructors' experiences in these programs, but relatively few have attempted to measure how learning communities affect key outcomes such as students persistence, course completion, and degree attainment. (Bloom & Sommo, 2005, p. 15)

For purposes of this review, a recent study at Kingsborough Community College (KCC) in Brooklyn, New York, is apropos this study. The Opening Doors Learning Communities Program targeted incoming freshman, and up to 25 students enrolled together to form cohorts. Of the 1900 freshman enrolled in 2004, 1000 enrolled in at least one developmental course. Two 12-week sessions comprised the semester with six-week sessions offered in the summer or winter as supplemental courses. Students enrolled in a mainstream course, a developmental course, and a freshman orientation course to help them with time management and study skills. Counseling components were part of the instructional intervention offering, which is a common feature on many campuses today (Bloom & Sommo, 2005). It is worth pointing out that the linked

courses model being studied by this researcher does not include an orientation or advising component.

The Opening Doors Learning Communities Program at KCC saw significant gains in retention of developmental English students that passed their courses over an entire semester compared to students taking these courses individually. “Thirty-three percent of Opening Doors students had retaken and passed both reading and writing skills tests one year later, compared to 14 percent of control group students” (Bloom & Sommo, 2005, p. iii). No statistically significant gains occurred after one year’s enrollment. But, overall retention rates for both groups were high: Seventy-six percent for the Opening Doors students, and 72% for the non-Opening Doors students.

In addition, Bloom & Sommo (2005) singled out this particular case study as the “first evaluation of a community college program to use a rigorous research design” (p.iii) because students were randomly sampled, and a lottery was used to avoid selection bias. Bloom & Sommo (2005) noted that Tinto’s (1997, 1998b) previous quasi-experimental studies on La Guardia Community College and Seattle Central Community College respectively, lacked this rigor. As reported by Bloom & Sommo (2005), “They [referring to Tinto’s research] compared students who voluntarily enrolled in learning communities with students who chose not to enroll in such programs” (p. 15). However, Tinto (1997) noted his research conducted on learning communities at Seattle Central Community College “fills a critical gap” (p. 614) in the seminal research that attempts to link student involvement to student persistence. In addition to Tinto’s (1997, 1998b) research, Bloom & Sommo’s (2005) single case study adds to the existing body of

research on the broader impact of learning communities utilized by developmental studies programs.

. In addition, McClenney (2003) reports how several two-year institutions have used learning communities successfully as instructional learning protocols to boost overall retention rates. An example is the Community College of Denver (CCD) where “the average retention rate for students in learning communities at CCD for spring/fall and fall/spring was 71 percent, compared with the college average of 55 percent” (p. 1), a notable difference. Bollmann (1999) noted through a realignment of an instructional unit as a result of resource challenges, greater opportunities for learning communities were created at CCD.

Since less research has been conducted on learning communities in developmental education, a case study in the field from the early 1990s is noteworthy. Roueche & Roueche (1993) selected 12 strong community colleges’ response to at-risk or under-prepared students and reported Middlesex Community College in Bedford, MA, as having the most successful instructional strategies. This included a Freshman Seminar and Course Clusters’ Program. One example of the Course Clusters Program included an Introduction to Psychology course, English Composition, Environmental Studies, and Freshman Seminar. The Freshman Seminar component of this model carried the weight of student interaction and direct involvement with faculty through weekly journaling by students with “lengthy comments” (p. 186) from faculty. When interviewed using open-ended questions, faculty and students responded favorably.

More important, students enrolled in these cohorts outperformed their non-participant counterparts by a significant amount. One cluster program, the liberal arts cluster, comprised of all developmental courses saw a 100 percent retention rate from fall to spring semester (Roueche & Roueche, 1993). By comparison, the non-participant group from the same liberal arts program saw a “34 percent drop after one semester” (p. 225). The strongest feature of the Course Clusters and Freshman Seminar programs was the team-teaching component, which is not a feature of a linked courses model.

Roueche & Roueche (1993) reported additionally on a linked courses example at Illinois Central College in East Peoria, which maintained a Basic Skills Testing Program with strong features of a learning community. The QUEST program offered 40 hours of general education courses that featured integration of the curriculum, (e.g., Chemistry and Society). Co-teaching and thematic linkages were features of the QUEST program (1993). Student assignments coalesced around projects, open-ended study, and tests that required higher levels of conceptual thinking rather than rote memory (1993). From their spotlight on Illinois Central College’s QUEST program, Roueche & Roueche (1993) added to the small but growing literature on instructional interventions in developmental education.

#### *How Learning Communities and Research on Learning Communities Can Improve*

Learning communities are not without its critics. An obvious criticism is the displaced levels of effort made by different participants or freeloading for both students and faculty. Additional problems include and are not limited to social and emotional support without intellectual stimulation, forms and procedures getting in the way of the



substance of study, diminishing content of the work, and loss of individuality (Seifert, 2006).

In addition, for purposes of this study, one challenge to the linked courses model is the clear articulation of the thematic links between the two course offerings. It is not enough to simply state courses will be taught together or that the material is approached “from different angles” (Levine, Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004, p. 72). Furthermore, campuses must evaluate first their own needs and resources to determine if the learning community program is appropriate (2004). Finally, continuous assessment, redefining and revisiting the purpose of the learning community is crucial to success.

Appropriate research conducted on learning communities can influence how well assessment practices and implementation of learning community models are achieved.

Lichtenstein (2005) found:

What is missing in this wealth of research are meaningful studies of variations among learning communities within one program and the influence of these variations on outcomes. The few available comparative studies were examinations of the effect of programmatic and structural differences across program types, and attempt to assess whether learning communities, regardless of model, are effective...this neglect has led to a tacit assumption of congruity and sameness of student experiences in sections within a distinct program. (pp. 342-343)

In a study on differences *within sections* of a learning community, Lichtenstein (2005) argued that

...positive classroom environments (PCEs) were characterized by multiple linkages between the two courses, an emphasis on experiential and active learning, accessible and attentive faculty, a sense of community, and support for academic and social adjustment to college. In negative classroom environments (NCEs), these characteristics were either absent or occurred in negative forms that were detrimental to the learning experience. For example, negative

environments were characterized by the absence of linkages between the courses, faculty conflicts, faculty who were detached or critical of students and unable or unwilling to help them with their academic skill acquisition, and a weak or absent feeling of community. Mixed classroom environments (MCEs) frequently provided a sense of community but, in general, lacked the strong linkage between courses, faculty, and subject matter. Instead of providing active and experiential learning opportunities, professors in mixed classroom environments relied more on lectures. (Lichtenstein, 2005, pp. 347-348)

From her two-year institutional research, Lichtenstein (2005) found the quality and dedication of the teacher were the strongest components to the success of a learning community model.

Addressing this particular gap in the literature on learning communities, Pascarella & Terenzini (2005) indicated “studies of cooperative learning and learning communities highlight students’ classroom experiences as a factor in their persistence decision making” (p. 423). And, to further address this gap, Pascarella & Terenzini (2005) supplemented the small amount of evidence to link directly instructional strategies and classroom activities to student persistence by suggesting that “the evidence on the role of classroom activities and pedagogies in the persistence process is generally consistent with the proposition that learning communities promote persistence” (p. 423). From their four-year institutional perspective, Porter & Swing (2006) reported most seminal research conducted on first-year seminars focuses on the impact of overall courses rather than “what specific aspects of the course affect persistence” (p. 90). Tinto (1997) echoed this observation generally, what happens in the classroom matters to student persistence, and to overall retention rates.

## **Summary**

Recent literature and research emerging in the area of learning communities give voice to faculty and campus administrators who have selected learning communities as a preferred model of curricular instruction. This review of the literature sheds light on the lack of seminal research on student persistence in two-year institutions, and research on learning community models within a developmental setting. As a result, pertinent non-peer reviewed articles, the Internet, WebPages, PowerPoint, and single case studies linking student persistence to learning communities become alternative resources for educational practitioners, scholars, and researchers.

Evidence from the research addressing student persistence in two-year institutions is lacking. In particular, results from single and multiple case studies are available on learning communities in developmental education rather than large-scale, longitudinal research undertakings. Therefore, points made in this review of the literature reinforce the need for further research.

*Experience does not ever err; it is only your judgment that errs in promising itself results which are not caused by your experiments.*

-Leonardo da Vinci

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

This chapter provided an overview of the design methodology used to examine student persistence in a learning community model. Provided is the methodology itself, the research design, the sample description, the procedures and data collection, the description of data analysis, and a summary. This study aimed to understand which features of a learning community may increase student persistence specifically in a linked courses model. Two research questions guided this study:

1. Which features of a learning community promote student persistence at a two-year institution during one semester of study?
2. Among students and faculty in this particular linked courses model, are there aspects of student experiences that appear to distinguish those who complete their coursework with a passing grade of “C” or better from those who fail or drop out?

The sub-qualifiers below provided a conceptual framework to explore academic and social integration for all students. In addition, they helped to identify features of a learning community. Socialization features of a learning community rely on the same principles of building a community with faculty and students to promote retention and persistence, as do the basic principles of Astin’s (1984) involvement theory.

1. To what extent did student interaction with faculty and their peers, inside and outside of class, play a role in the student's involvement in their learning?
2. How did collaborative classroom assignments or projects promote shared inquiry, shared knowledge, and intellectual richness?
3. To what extent did students and faculty report satisfaction and success in the learning environment?
4. How did student perceptions of their learning environment shape their affective and cognitive behaviors?
5. How were features of this particular learning community, as reported by teachers and students, reflected in the learning community model adopted by the institution? Student data were studied with a range of indicators to determine levels of participation, interaction, and satisfaction in the learning environment.

### **Qualitative Research Design**

For purposes of this study, an interpretive and natural experimental design was employed. Because this was a participant observation study, the approach was “to describe the phenomenon in depth” (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 8). Through oral surveys, which involved 60-90 minute interviews per participant catalogued a synthesis of rich descriptions through inductive analysis so that themes could emerge through an identification of patterns with a creative focus (2002). The blending of narrative histories and elements of grounded theory abstraction were employed because of the interpretive design methodology of this study. This next section provides an in-depth background on and attributes of the nature of qualitative research, which supported this type of participant observation study.

In order to build substantive theory about how to understand features of a learning community, a qualitative research approach heightened the ability to understand human behavior in social settings (Bogdan, 1992). An inductive vs. deductive method framed this research design. To rely upon generalizability, ahistorical findings, operationalization of variables, validity or hypothesis generation is to betray the essence of sound qualitative research (Bogdan, 1992; Crotty, 1998, Hatch, 2002). Qualitative research has gained substantial momentum and renown in the field of educational research since the early 1980s (Bogdan, 1992).

Because of the emphasis on the positive socialization aspects of an educational setting in a learning community, qualitative research and an interpretive design methodology are apropos this participant observation study. The aim of qualitative research is to ascertain complexities of behavior within the frame of reference of the participant who generates the interest of the researcher (1992). To allow for the respondent to elicit a response not encumbered by “prearranged questions” (p.3) remains a defining trait of sound qualitative research because it allows the researcher to derive meaning, not causality from the phenomenon studied.

Qualitative research uses questions to uncover how individuals perceive their world and how they structure meaning. Yet, this type of research “reflects a kind of dialogue or interplay between researches and their subjects since researchers do not approach their subjects neutrally (Bogdan, 1992, p.33). Some best known examples of qualitative research are “participant observation and in-depth interviewing,” (p. 2) which this researcher will employ. As such, qualitative methods utilize questions in an open-

ended interview format to uncover how individuals perceive their world and how they structure meaning. Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2000) stress the importance that the charge of the “educational investigator is very often to explain the means by which an orderly social world is established and maintained in terms of its shared meanings” (p. 187). Furthermore, seeing teaching and learning in process is crucial to strong participant observation in educational research (Smith, 1978).

To build upon an understanding about how students and faculty in a learner-centered environment derive socially constructed meaning, a qualitative research approach heightens the ability to understand human behavior in social settings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Patton, 1990). In addition, “a major purpose of educational research is to provide evidence to help people decide which opinions are correct—or at least more correct” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000, p. 3). Other qualitative research characteristics appropriate for this study included the “natural setting as the direct source of data and the researcher [as] the key instrument” (Bogdan, 1992, p. 29) where actions can best be interpreted in their own setting or institution, given that qualitative research relies on “soft vs. “hard data” (p. 2). Rich, illustrative descriptions replaced numbers or a quantitative approach (1992). Patton (1990) reinforces the notion that qualitative research is not attempting to manipulate the research setting. Because qualitative research is not concerned with outcomes but processes, “negotiate[ing] meaning” (p.31) ties together how “people perceive themselves, others and what they take for granted” (p.31). Furthermore, assumptions or consciously superimposing one’s beliefs defies the logic of sound qualitative research.

Because this qualitative research was viewed loosely through the constructivist lens or paradigm, reality is perceived as co-constructed without objectivist or positivist underpinnings (Crotty, 1998; Hatch, 2002; Guba & Lincoln, 1998). A weakness to a strict adherence to one particular paradigm limits one's options of discovery.

Conversely,

...a paradigm of choices rejects methodological orthodoxy in favor of methodological appropriateness as the primary criterion for judging methodological quality...the paradigm of choices recognizes that different methods are appropriate for different situations....too much research, evaluation, and policy analysis is based on habit rather than situational responsiveness and attention to methodological appropriateness. (Patton, 1990, pp. 38-39)

Ferrarotti (1981), Lincoln & Guba (1985), and Mannheim (1975) argue that the most profound knowledge comes from the deepest levels of intersubjectivity and immersion of the researcher. This methodological approach embraced the naturalistic inquiry and negated the preponderance of validity to rely on a scientific paradigm. Therefore, this perspective strengthened the researcher's abilities to conduct sound qualitative research in a participant observation setting.

### **Sample Description**

Located in the southwest, this two-year public institution maintains several campuses in the downtown and its surrounding areas, which serves eight counties. This large two-institution provides education to over 32,000 college-credit students. Of this student population, 43% are males and 56 % are females. Of the total population estimates for all counties, 58.9% are White, 29.2% are Hispanic, 7.6% are Black, and



4.3% are Other. Within the 18-44 age population, 55.3% are White, 32.2% are Hispanic, 7.4% are Black, and 5.1% are Other.

The institution serves a 72% part-time student body, employs roughly 72% part-time faculty with 27% of faculty hired as full-time instructors. It offers 136 Associate of Arts degrees, 127 Associate of Science degrees, 654 Associate of Applied Science degrees, and 516 certificates. The operating budget is \$141,563,562.

The researcher chose a linked courses offering in a developmental setting offered during the spring semester 2007. Eight learning communities were offered for this particular semester, but two failed to make due to low course enrollment. Four were course clusters, which were comprised of three courses, a blend of two developmental and one credit-bearing course. When three developmental courses were offered, a study skills class was included.

#### *Sample: (Faculty & Students)*

This qualitative study involved a mixed, non-random, purposive sampling of one adjunct faculty member and 14 mainstream and non-mainstream students in the linked courses offering.

#### *Initial Faculty Contact*

To gain access to faculty as a researcher, the researcher contacted an associate vice president of the institution. Fifteen faculty members' names were given to the researcher and then were located on the school's official web site. As part of the pre-interview phase for this study, faculty members were contacted via phone or email for a brief pre-interview, which included a concise background of the researcher, in addition

to an explanation of the study, plus an initial request for their participation. The explanation about the research was delivered verbally and confirmed the following:

1. The nature of the study. The purpose of the study was to understand which features in a learning community contribute to student persistence and student success.
2. The type of qualitative study. This would involve strong participant observation from the researcher, as a student and observer, plus one semi-formal tape-recorded interview from each participant to understand their experiences in a learning community.

In order to ensure participants' compliance, two questions were asked:

Question #1- Is the potential participant, as a teacher in a learning community, interested in this study and willing to be interviewed with the single interview lasting for a minimum of 60 minutes?

Question #2-Does the potential participant, as a faculty member, approve of this researcher conducting research in a participant observation fashion?

As such, the researcher will engage as a student in the mainstream classroom and observe as researcher for the entire semester.

Furthermore, faculty were given the opportunity to ask questions about the nature of the research and were encouraged to discuss any concerns. For those faculty who chose not to participate, a subsequent request was made to meet with several faculty at their convenience to informally discuss their experiences and perspectives as a faculty member in a collaborative learning community setting. Four faculty members agreed to this request, and discussions with them over the course of the semester ensued, which helped to inform the researcher about the history of learning communities on the

campus, while providing also a method with which to conduct comparative analyses within qualitative methods for triangulation purposes.

The adjunct faculty member who agreed to participate in the study was given a consent form to sign prior to the interview, and administrative approval by an associate vice president was granted subsequent to permission from the faculty member. Students enrolled in this linked courses offering, however, were not contacted prior to the research conducted and were asked for their voluntary participation during the second class session. The teacher was not present during this 10-minute introduction and request for participation.

#### *Student Participants*

The number of students as participants, not including the mainstream instructor, was speculative due to unknown pre-enrollment numbers. The average class size, according to the pre-interview phase, was 16 students. Therefore, the class size was not large by traditional standards, which may have ensured more in-depth interviewing opportunities with fewer students. The student demographics were 50% Hispanic and 50% non-Hispanic, but their population did not represent the small White majority at the institution, yet the sampling did represent the majority/minority status of the state. Once research began, the total enrollment was 25 students after the add/drop period because seven students dropped out. A combination of 14 mainstream and developmental students agreed to be interviewed. Nine students were mainstream students, and five students were non-mainstream students who were enrolled in the developmental reading course concurrently.

Once all student research participants were given a verbal explanation of the interview process, a consent form was signed prior to each interview. A signed copy of the consent form was made available for each interviewee for their personal records.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection methods were organized into two areas: active participant observation and semi-formal tape-recorded interviews.

#### *Participant Observation*

Active participation (Spradley, 1980) as opposed to passive, moderate, or complete participation was a primary data collection method where the researcher behaved similarly to participants but did not try and “blend in completely” (Mertens, 2005, p. 382). To observe participants “as they naturally occur in terms that appear to be meaningful” (p. 382) reinforced the goals of participant observation (2005) that has its roots in symbolic interactionism (Crotty, 1998). Furthermore, “Participant observation requires in-depth interaction because the inquirer adopts the role of subject within the research situation” (Alexander, 1982, p. 63).

At no time did the researcher sit at the back of the room to observe student phenomena and not be involved with students and the instructor. In- class participation and discussion defined the researcher’s role, which included sitting next to other students, taking notes, and asking questions, but rarely giving answers if questions were posed by the professor.

However, a downside to this phenomenological approach to in-depth participant observation is that it emphasized intersubjective understanding, unsystemic collection of

data, researcher bias, and subjectivity of the researcher, all which could yield unreliable and invalidated results (Becker, 1958). The researcher considered also that qualitative research should never be used as a warrant for “undisciplined and haphazard ‘poking around’” (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p. 251). To reinforce the strength of participant observation for the study, the quoted observation below by Bailey (1978), as cited in Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2000), should be considered:

In a natural setting, it is difficult for the researcher who wishes to be covert not to act as a participant. If the researcher does not participate, there is little to explain his presence, as he is very obvious to the actual participants...most studies in a natural setting are unstructured participant observation studies. (p. 187)

#### *Moderate Blend of Participant Observation*

First, a moderate-blended participant observation technique was employed that consisted of:

- Observation of most classes throughout the entire semester.
- Informal conversations with student participants and the adjunct professor in the learning community during and outside of class time.
- Examination of unobtrusive data or pertinent artifacts (e.g., memos, classroom assignments, projects, curriculum maps, and lesson planning protocols).
- “In situ ‘field notes’ and out-of-setting ‘summary observations and interpretations.’” (Smith, 1978, p. 327)

In addition, the participant observer relied upon “interpretive asides, in situ ‘field notes’ and out-of-setting ‘summary observations and interpretations’” (Smith, 1978, p. 327) for triangulation purposes. Furthermore, “Participant observation requires in-depth interaction because the inquirer adopts the role of subject within the research situation”

(Alexander, 1982, p. 63). As participant observer, “cross-checking observational findings” (Mertens, 2005, p. 385) included informal conversations with other stakeholders employed at this two-year institution. This aspect of triangulation within qualitative methods is explicated in the subsequent qualitative criteria data analysis section.

Second, with regard to how observations were written, Strauss & Corbin (1998) stress the importance of description as a quintessential element to communication in qualitative research, and that it involves “...purpose...an audience...and the selective eye of the viewer (p. 17). The goal of description by the researcher was the “use of words to convey a mental image of an event, a piece of scenery, a scene, an experience, an emotion, or a sensation; the account related from the perspective of the person doing the depicting” (p. 15).

### *Semi-Formal Interviews*

Observation in and of itself lacks the expressivity of language (Tan & Goh, 1999). The open-ended, semi-formal, tape-recorded interviews served as a sound mode of inquiry as a phenomenological-based data collection method for the researcher to understand how participants made meaning of their environment (Seidman, 1998). The in-depth nature of live interviews helped to “examine the concrete experience of people in that area and the meaning their experience had for them” (p. 10). The nature of interviewing itself allowed for the participant to understand their own understanding (Seidman, 1998). The interpretation of this blend between intersubjective and empirical observation of approaches was an emphasis, however, rather than a dichotomy.

The structure and methodological approach to these semi-formal interviews reified Lincoln & Guba's (1985) outcomes for successful interviewing. The participants could relay information about events, activities, feelings, issues or awareness including a participant's explanation of past events or experiences. Interviewing also contributed to the participant's ability to guess or predict future experiences including the researcher's ability to extend this information from other sources (i.e., multiple interviews and similar patterns in the literature). Finally, interviewing participants provided member check to determine internal consistency. Patton (1990) argues for multiple forms of data collection as being intrinsic to sound qualitative research. Outcomes from these data analysis are "suggestive rather than conclusive" (Crotty, 1998, p.13), however.

#### *Setting for Interviews*

The data collection for this one-time qualitative participant observation study took place over a period of one semester.

All interviews were conducted in a professional setting, which was in a campus conference room with a locked door. The times for the interviews were mutually agreed upon by the researcher and participants. In general, questions during the interview were structured to elicit responses about the participants' satisfaction, work, and learning in a learning community model. The open-ended interviewer's questions were based on descriptive, structural, and essential questions (Spradley, 1979; Hatch & Freeman, 1988). The process of collecting raw data to understand how participants made meaning of their own understanding in this context (Seidman, 1998) was adapted accordingly, and is explicated in more depth below.

### *Rationale and Description of Interview Protocols*

A review of the participants' life history was relevant (Seidman, 1998) up to the time that individual became an enrolled student or faculty member in the linked courses offering. Initial questions during the interview helped to establish that important context for the participant and observer (1998). Students were asked questions that would reveal, in addition to their own educational background, parental and sibling educational backgrounds, parental support of education growing up, current support from family members or domestic partners, students' employment status, and previous educational experiences including any previous developmental classes, and whether the student had passed those courses.

All other questions were established to elicit responses about student perceptions of their academic and socialization experiences. These included satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the classroom environment and on the campus, interaction with faculty and peers, course expectations, academic goals, personal and professional scheduling habits, expected grade in the mainstream class, personal traits that would contribute to academic success, and how affective and cognitive behaviors were affected due to various factors (e.g., peer pressure, skills and aptitude not aligned with course material). Furthermore, for developmental students, particular inquiries about the nature of their learning community experience (i.e., shared content and skills, collaborative projects, and heightened peer interaction in the smaller cohort) were examined.

Protocol for questions was based on classes taken in qualitative research and the researcher's early experiences while conducting interviews in a different pilot study on



the same campus. Interview protocols were adjusted as necessary. All interview protocols are listed in Appendix A and B sections of this study.

## **Data Analysis**

### *Qualitative Criteria*

Researchers in a qualitative setting should replace the notion of validity with trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) because qualitative research relies on “credibility,” transferability,” dependability,” and confirmability” (pp. 289-332). Thus, every effort was made to avoid manipulation of data or researcher bias through the following mechanisms:

#### *1. Credibility*

- a. “If what a participant conveys to the researcher in lengthy interviews is consistent with “what we know the literature says...and what other participants in the study have said” (Seidman, 1998, p. 19), then this speaks or “relates to a broader discourse on the issue” (p. 19). This statement addresses the credibility issue and is strengthened by the lengthy process of interviewing, taping, and transcribing participants’ responses, which provided a diversity of experience as individuals.

#### *2. Transferability*

- b. For purposes of this research, participants (faculty and students) are of different gender, of different age groups, are of different academic backgrounds, and are from different sectors of the city/regional population, which reinforced the concept of transferability.

### 3. *Dependability*

- c. This is the most difficult construct to address. The nature of a two-year institution is that enrollments are in a constant state of flux. But, changes in enrollment are a constant rather than a variable in a two-year institution; therefore, the constant in a community college could be considered as perpetual change.

### 4. *Confirmability*

- d. The structure of these interviews, and “the passage of time over which the interviews occur, the internal consistency and possible external consistency of the passages, the syntax, diction, and even nonverbal aspects of the passage” (Seidman, 1998, p. 19), lent itself to confirmability. The interviews, as data collection, relayed participants’ truths from their perspective. Through the lengthy process of interviews, the researcher gained confirmability by seeking out patterns and consistencies within the participants’ text.

In addition, Yin’s (1994) notion of imagining someone always looking over one’s shoulder helped to control for researcher bias.

The data included 15 open-ended interviews, in situ field notes, written reflections, and unobtrusive data rigorously analyzed to the best of the researcher’s ability using strains of constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). All data were “inductively analyzed to identify the recurring patterns or common themes that cut across the data” (Merriam & Associates, 2002, pp. 6-7). Flexible researchers should be able to “draw on their own experiences when analyzing materials because they realize

that these become the foundations for making comparisons and discovering properties and dimensions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 5).

A mixed-methods approach within qualitative methods was employed in order to gain through comparative analyses, a triangulation of data sources

...that compares and cross-checks the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means and checks for the consistency of what people say about the same thing...and compares the perspectives of people from different points of view. (Patton, 1990, p. 467)

Furthermore, the researcher attended several informal meetings over the course of the semester with three full-time faculty and one adjunct professor who had taught and participated in learning communities for several years. As such, this dependability and confirmability measure became a method with which to determine if the learning community model being explored utilized similar features of other linked courses offering at the same institution. Informal conversations with an advisor, an administrator working in institutional effectiveness, a counselor, and a learning labs manager added to triangulation methods.

Unobtrusive data such as pertinent institutional documents were also examined. This included the institution’s developmental education plan for 2005-06, the course catalogue, brochures on learning communities, and institutional effectiveness reports that measured student progress toward completion of a degree and semester-to-semester persistence. These data are disaggregated by ethnicity, full-time or part-time enrollment, developmental education and mainstream enrollments, and FTIC (first-time-in-college) status.

These criteria substantiated the researcher's goal to explore meaning from the academic and social experience the mainstream instructor and students shared in a learning community model. Finally, establishing patterns within the semi-formal structured open-ended interviews were compared against the review of the literature, unpublished lectures, periodicals, articles and PowerPoint presentations. A description and analysis of participants' interviews, in addition to the review of the literature, accounted for the range of variables and interactions from which the data were derived. Data were placed into either ratings or categories to be further elucidated through descriptions. The importance of identification of themes and patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was an essential factor in data analysis. The consequences of recurring clusters of significant meaning statements (Creswell, 1998) embodied participants' views taken from transcripts of the interviews.

### **Summary**

Sound qualitative research has its foundation in phenomenology: understanding how the world is perceived by those who live in it. Within this framework, the researcher should feel comfortable toward this qualitative methodological endeavor (Hatch, 2002). With researcher-as-instrument (Hatch, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the uncovering of truth as a co-constructed reality was brought to bear through interplay between researcher and participant(s). The *researcher-as-bricoleur* enabled a rich understanding and capacity to understand how individuals perceive or make sense of their world because socialization aspects of human behavior are universal (Hatch, 2002).

*The thing-in-itself. (das Ding an sich)*

--Immanuel Kant

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Introduction and Overview**

The first three chapters of this study provided an introduction and overview of the study, a review of the related literature, and a detailed rationale for the research design and methodology to support the research undertaken. The fourth chapter includes an introduction and overview, a detailed description of data coding, plus findings and analysis. Also included are brief portraits of the 14 student participants as context is critical to meaning of an event or experience in qualitative research (Patton, 1989).

The study findings are presented in two sections: social and academic involvement themes from the mainstream class, and social and academic involvement themes from the non-mainstream or developmental reading cohort.

### *Summary of and Rationale for Methodology*

Characteristics of sound qualitative research lent itself to this case study. Qualitative research is concerned with process, not outcomes. Qualitative research relies upon several elements: subjective interaction between researcher and participant, interpretation of the phenomena that emerges from participants' experiences, and conveying that meaning in a rich, in-depth and forthright manner.

Within this context, the challenge for the researcher was: (1) to include all salient opinions and perceptions held by the interviewees, (2) to synthesize their experiences in an integrated fashion, and (3) to understand more profoundly the meaning in and out of

the classroom those experiences had for students and the instructor. The intent during the coding phase and analysis of the findings was to organize participant responses in a clear and concise way with no purposeful obstruction to their voice: student and faculty voices were meant to be heard. Therefore, indigenous typologies were employed at the thematic level rather than analyst-constructed typologies (Patton, 1990).

Examination of both groups of students in a natural experimental setting required utilizing the same criteria with one distinguishing feature removed. This meant developmental (non-mainstream) and mainstream students were asked the same series of interview protocols with the exception of a series of questions given to non-mainstream students to elicit responses about specific learning community features (i.e., collaborative activities, shared inquiry and shared curricular experiences in the developmental course). Generic responses to these questions distinguished non-mainstream students from their mainstream counterparts.

Several students declined the request to be interviewed, so this research undertaking is not offered as a final review or assessment.

### **Overview**

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of which features or attributes of a learning community may lead to greater student persistence where mainstream and non-mainstream students were enrolled in the same mainstream course. The study's focus brought forth interviewees' perceptions about their academic and socialization experience inside and outside both classrooms, in addition to comparisons of overall academic performance in the mainstream class and persistence into fall.

The study's two central research questions were:

1. Which features of a learning community foster student persistence at a two-year institution during one semester of study?
2. Among students and faculty in this particular linked courses model, are there aspects of student experiences that appear to distinguish those who complete their coursework with a passing grade of "C" or better from those who fail or drop out?

The sub-qualifiers below provided a conceptual framework to investigate academic and social integration for all students in both classrooms. In addition, they helped to identify features of a learning community:

1. To what extent did student interaction with faculty and their peers, inside and outside of class, play a role in the student's involvement in their learning?
2. How did collaborative classroom assignments or projects promote shared inquiry, shared knowledge, and intellectual richness?
3. To what extent did students and faculty report satisfaction and success in the learning environment?
4. How did student perceptions of their learning environment shape their affective and cognitive behaviors?
5. How were features of this particular learning community, as reported by teachers and students, reflected in the learning community model adopted by the institution?

Student data were studied with a range of indicators to determine levels of participation, interaction, and satisfaction in the learning environment. Specifically, several indicators for each sub-qualifier were examined.

For peer to peer interaction and teacher and student interaction, the specific indicators were: (1) availability of the teacher, (2) students seeking out teacher for help, (3) students spending time together outside of class, (4) students studying together, (5) attendance, and (6) purchasing of the required textbook.

Student and faculty satisfaction inside and outside the classroom, the researcher examined interviewee responses about: (1) course material being useful and meaningful to students, (2) class activities being well planned with clear course expectations, and (3) student participation in the classroom being supported. The mainstream instructor participant was asked about additional areas: (1) assessment criteria, (2) student skill and aptitude sets being appropriate for a credit-bearing course, and (3) differentiated learning levels being recognized by the mainstream instructor when a student's skill level was not commensurate with course content.

Reinforcement of shared skills and content of the mainstream curriculum in the non-mainstream developmental reading class relied upon perceptions and perspectives given during tape-recorded interviews from non-mainstream students, and what they reported in the developmental reading course. In addition, informal conversations and a tape-recorded interview with the mainstream adjunct professor participant regarding her collaboration with the adjunct developmental reading instructor were used.

Specific integrative features of a learning community included: (1) students being able to express ideas and synthesize material learned in multiple ways through common understandings or shared inquiry, and (2) evidence of integrated projects or collaborative learning. This was explored specifically through non-mainstream student



participants' and the mainstream instructor participant's recollections plus course artifacts that may have included a shared syllabus or other shared materials beyond the required psychology textbook.

Affective and cognitive behaviors affected by or affecting the classroom included: (1) receiving and responding to phenomena (i.e., student listens and participates, is comfortable speaking in class, feels safe), (2) students taking responsibility for personal actions and prioritizing time effectively, (3) students internalizing values including self-reliance, initiative, and being goal-oriented, and (4) students synthesizing the material beyond rote memorization with the ability to engage in higher order critical thinking skills through an application of knowledge and skills from their experiences in each course(s) to everyday life.

How features of this particular linked courses model were reflected in the learning community model adopted by the institution, the fifth sub-qualifier, is addressed in Chapter five. Its analysis included taking into consideration the aforementioned indicators, plus the description of the linked courses model as an instructional intervention in the institution's 2005 developmental education plan, its course catalogue and brochures distributed by the institution about learning communities, and informal conversations with a counselor who worked on the campus where the study was conducted, in addition to several full-time faculty members who taught in learning communities on various campuses at the same institution.

As reported in Chapter Three, contrasting and comparing their perspectives, experiences, perceptions, and stories with findings from this study provided proper steps toward triangulation or cross-checking for consistencies in the data that were “derived at different times and by different means within *qualitative methods*” (Patton, 1990, p. 467).

### *Participant Screening and Selection*

Certain guidelines and procedures for recruitment of the participants were followed. All interviews took place in a locked conference room on the campus where the mainstream psychology class and developmental reading class were located to ensure privacy and ease for students and the adjunct professor to meet before or after classes. Prior to initial interviews, faculty names were given to the researcher and were located on the institution’s web site directory as instructors who taught in learning communities.

As part of the initial contact phase for this study, each faculty member who had taught in learning communities was contacted via phone for a brief conversation, which included a concise background of the researcher, an explanation of the study, and a request for voluntary participation. To minimize risk or anxiety from the researcher’s presence in the classroom, assurances were given to the potential participant that discretion, anonymity, and privacy were a priority.

One adjunct faculty member demonstrated an interest and willingness to participate in the study. One other faculty member had expressed an interest in

participation, but the linked courses model that individual taught in was cancelled due to low enrollment.

Student participants were not contacted individually in the initial phase. A brief ten-minute overview and introduction to the study was delivered in the mainstream psychology class so that all students gained an understanding about the purpose of the research and the nature of the study. To minimize any risk or anxiety students might have felt, assurances were given that the researcher would use discretion and protect personal privacy. To minimize pressure from the presence of the instructor, the mainstream professor requested voluntarily to leave the classroom during this phase of the request for voluntary participation of students. A sign-up sheet was circulated, and student contact information was recorded. The researcher, with permission from all students who agreed to be interviewed, contacted them individually by electronic mail and by phone. Prior to the tape-recorded interviews, each student signed a consent form with the full understanding that a copy would be given to them after the interview was concluded.

Of the 25 mainstream and non-mainstream students enrolled in the mainstream psychology class, 15 agreed to be interviewed after their first introduction to the study in the mainstream classroom. Within 24 hours, one potential participant emailed the instructor to say she had changed her mind and no longer wanted to participate. In total, 14 students and one adjunct faculty member were interviewed for this participant observation study. Of the 25 students, eight mainstream students opted not to participate,

and three of the eight non-mainstream students who were concurrently enrolled in the developmental reading course chose not to participate.

Interview protocol questions were not delivered beforehand to the potential interviewees; however, a brief description of questions was given during the course of the initial request to participate voluntarily in the study. Interviews were conducted from early March through mid-May 2007 throughout the spring semester. The length of the interviews ranged from 60-90 minutes in length. To confirm certain facts and unintelligible words recorded during live interviews, some follow-up was required through emails and phone calls. Contact between the researcher and students terminated after any necessary clarifications. When the official semester concluded, students were not contacted by the researcher to discuss reasons why they passed or failed the course. The researcher relied upon extensive field notes and the 15 (14 students and one adjunct instructor) tape-recorded interviews to speculate as to why some students passed and others failed. Additional contact with students would have required another series of tape-recorded interviews, which would have betrayed the methodological construct of the study. At no time was a student or instructor's name written or printed in the vicinity where interviews were conducted or in the classroom while the researcher participated and observed. Throughout the data collection phase of the study, participants were assigned numbers to ensure privacy.

### **Qualitative Interpretative Analysis: Coding the Data**

Data were then coded after transcribing verbatim all fourteen student interviews and one adjunct professor's interview. Following transcriptions, a rubric per participant

was created to organize the interview text into specific content headings: the students' personal background, educational goals and challenges, satisfaction with their social and academic experiences at the institution, perceptions and expectations of the course(s), expected and actual academic performance, whether or not the student had considered dropping-out, and whether or not the student planned to return in the fall. For the teacher, a similar interview protocol was created with obvious student-generated questions omitted and teacher-generated queries added.

Knowing the actual identification of a student as a result of interviewing a small pool of interviewees at this juncture in the data analysis was an obvious weakness to researcher objectivity. The possibility of superimposing analyst-generated themes at this early phase was apparent. To allow interviewee themes to emerge naturally, the text from each rubric was literally cut and pasted onto large sheets of paper (as anonymous text) and examined by the researcher until dominant patterns emerged without a priori knowledge if the student was a mainstream or non-mainstream (developmental) student. When the student participant expressed strong congruence and was particularly passionate about a certain matter that the researcher inquired about, those statements were identified as strong motifs or themes within each mainstream or non-mainstream class. Themes identified were then written onto new sheets of paper with supporting anonymous text pasted below. At this point, the researcher went back and identified each quote to avoid quote redundancy (attributing multiple quotes to several people when, in fact, a series of quotes may have come from one person).

At this juncture in the process, for any theme to be considered dominant, at least fifty percent of the respondents must have stated congruence with that particular motif. And, if a person made multiple statements about the same theme, those were not included in the percentage, but were considered useful when using representational quotes to augment the findings.

### **Context of the Study**

The setting for the 15 interviews and participant observation of a classroom throughout the spring semester took place in a large two-year institution located in the Southwest, which maintains an enrollment of over 32,000 students (roughly 8000 students are full-time) with several campuses and centers.

The campus where interviews were conducted had an enrollment of approximately 3200 students with roughly 1200 FTEs (full-time equivalents). The average credit-hours taken on the campus were approximately six credit-hours. Overall student demographic breakdown at the campus where interviews were conducted was 45% White, 18% Black, 28% Hispanic, and 4% Asian/Pacific-Islander, with less than one percent Native American. The 14 student interviewees on this campus came from diverse backgrounds experientially and ethnically, yet their socio-economic backgrounds and personal goals had more similarities than differences.

### **Characteristics of Student Interviewees**

#### *Ethnic Background*

Participants self-identified their culture at the beginning of each interview. These included Mexican, Native American, El Salvadoran, White, African-American,

Cambodian, South Korean, and Chicana representations. The ethnic breakdown of participants was 50% Hispanic and 50% non-Hispanic. Of the non-Hispanic group, student participants were 14% African-American, 14% Asian, and 22% White. Seventy-nine percent of interviewees were females and 21% were males. The average age of student participants was 25. The female average age was 26, and the average male age was 19. The socio-economic status of participants' families from childhood through adolescence was represented mainly from a lower class representation. One or two student participants were from lower middle-class to middle-class backgrounds.

Most student interviewees were either natives of the Southwest or Mexico. They grew up in surrounding towns with two and three generations of families living in those areas in close proximity to the city where the two-year institution was located. Two students were not citizens but on their path to citizenship. One interviewee was an international student who planned on returning to her country after obtaining a pharmacy degree.

#### *Marital Status*

Regarding marital status of the interviewees, 36% were married, 43% had children, 57% were single, and one had a domestic partner. Most student participants discussed openly the closeness they felt with their families; all single students with the exception of an international student lived at home. For the married students, all reported strong support from their spouses and children, even if they did not receive current or past support from parents.

### *Education and Employment of Parents*

The education of student participants' parents varied but the majority had received a secondary education. Four parents had earned college degrees with one parent possessing a doctorate. Fifteen had diplomas or GEDs, four parents were identified as illiterate by student participants, and five parents had second, fifth, or tenth grade educations. Comments about parental support of education ranged from, "My parents didn't really value education" to "My father says an American education is the most important thing for me to have." The majority of mainstream and non-mainstream students expressed strong support from their parents that education was a top priority, in particular a couple of students who left Mexico with their families. Some students did complain, however, of families not supporting their educational goals, and some of their siblings were envious of their educational goals and ambition. Part of the reason for the jealousy may have been due to the fact that several older siblings married early and did not receive the benefits of a secondary or postsecondary education. Some of the student interviewees were younger siblings, and education over time had evolved from a growing interest into a priority for their parents and families.

Most student interviewees shared similar experiences of hard-working parents who had little time to spend in the home. Almost half of student interviewees' parents held working-class or menial labor jobs. Roughly half shared similar personal family struggles with either parental or sibling drug abuse, prison time, violence in the home and early teen pregnancies (A couple of interviewees had children in their early teens).



### *Education and Developmental Education Backgrounds of Interviewees*

Eighty-six percent of students had diplomas and two had GEDs. Ten of the 14 students (71%) were FTIC (first time in college). Of the fourteen student interviewees, seven (50%) were first-generation to go to college.

Eighty percent (not all the same interviewees who were FTIC) had previous developmental education courses with a few who were required to enroll in all three levels of remediation in reading, writing, and math over an 18-month period. All had passed their previous developmental classes including the current spring semester with the exception of two students. For comparison purposes, institutional effectiveness measures are reported and disaggregated by FTIC, developmental or non-developmental, part- or full-time to compare semester-to-semester persistence, course completion, and graduation rates, which are reported in Appendix C section of this study. State-wide percentages are reported within these indicators as well.

### *Employment Status of Interviewees, Educational Goals and GPA Average*

Eight student interviewees (57%) worked part-time (some students worked 30-40 hours per week and one student worked full-time) and six were not employed. Two of the four had quit their jobs to attend school. Eight interviewees (57%) were part-time students, and six were full-time enrollees.

Educational goals included nursing, pre-pharmacy, sonography, education, social work, architecture, business administration, pre-vet, and physical education. Six student participants with an average 2.0 GPA planned to transfer to one of the flagship institutions or another state university. One student's GPA was significantly lower than

the others, which reduced the overall average. The community college where this research was undertaken transfers approximately 200 students annually to one of the flagship institutions, and an additional 600 to another state university. Students must maintain a 3.6 GPA to be admitted to the flagship institution, and at least a 2.75 GPA to the other state university. The average GPA of all student interviewees was 2.4 (the highest a 4.0 and the lowest a .6). Students who attend the two-year institution where this study was conducted have an average GPA of 2.4.

### **Portraits of Student Interviewees**

Being familiar with the personal backgrounds and some life experiences of student interviewees place the research findings into a certain context and add additional meaning to the data even if a specific theme did not emerge. Below are student profiles of 14 community college student participants and the adjunct psychology professor participant. They are all identified through fictional names for privacy and protection purposes.

#### *Mainstream Student Participant Profiles*

##### *Bonnie*

Bonnie is a Texas native who started her studies in the fall of 2006. She is a 36-year-old psychology major who is enrolled full-time, doesn't work and raises three teenagers with her husband. Her life revolves around taking care of "a disabled husband" and handling their "financial struggles." Bonnie had enrolled in the institution previously but dropped out. Since losing her job working at a home health agency

recently, she decided to go back to school full-time. She has an overall 2.3 GPA and passed the psychology course with a “C.” She is currently enrolled for fall 2007.

#### *Laurel*

Laurel is a divorced mother of two teen-agers who works 25+ hours per week in a nursing home. As a nursing major, she has maintained a “B” average since she enrolled full-time in the fall of 2006. She passed the psychology course with a “B” and is a first-generation and FTIC student. Laurel described herself as a strict parent of two teen-agers because she and her siblings were allowed to “go wild” because her mother wanted to be her “friend” while raising them alone after their father left when Laurel was 13. Her mother currently lives at home with Laurel and her two children. In addition to working, going to school, and taking care of her family, she discussed the challenge of balancing her study habits with providing care for her mother who has health problems. She is currently enrolled for fall 2007.

#### *Manuel*

Manuel is the only student participant who worked full-time. He enrolled as a part-time student in the fall of 2005 as a nursing major. Manuel did not pass the course, and was absent or late regularly. His overall GPA at the college is a 1.2. Manuel is 20 years old, is first in his family to attend college, is FTIC, and lives at home with his two sisters. His El Salvadoran parents were poor and didn’t get beyond an elementary education. He is currently enrolled for fall 2007.

### *Raul*

Raul is a native of Mexico and is a single 19 year-old engineering major who has been enrolled full-time since the fall of 2006. He quit his job at a McDonald's to pursue his education. He is the second in his family to attend a postsecondary school, and he is a FTIC student. His sister attends one of the state's universities, and he has plans to transfer there as well. Raul doesn't work, but he described much of his time devoted to driving his siblings around to various activities because his father and mother work in a mill. His parents are uneducated. Raul has an overall 2.7 GPA and passed the psychology course with a "C." He is currently enrolled for fall 2007.

### *Shakira*

A native of Texas, Shakira is a married 21 year-old part-time student who enrolled in the fall of 2005. She is currently expecting her second child. Shakira lost her first child one year ago when the baby was just three months old. She spoke of the devastation that loss was for her, and so this second baby means "the world" to her. Her husband has a bachelor's degree, earns a good living, and is highly supportive of her getting an education. Shakira quit her job to attend school because she was making nine dollars an hour and "didn't want to do that for the rest of my life." Shakira's mother is a cafeteria worker and her father died of cirrhosis of the liver in 2001. Because of her father's Vietnam veteran status, Shakira receives additional financial aid. She is the sixth of seven siblings. Shakira explained that all of her brothers and sisters moved out of the house at an early age, and she does not associate too much with them because of their involvement in drugs. She is a first-generation student, is FTIC, and plans to transfer to a

flagship institution. She has maintained a 2.6 GPA, and she passed the psychology course with a “B.” In addition, Shakira is a FTIC and first-generation student. She is currently enrolled for fall 2007.

### *Oralia*

Oralia is a 25 year-old native of Mexico and describes herself as a “Chicana.” She had attended the institution previously but dropped out due to failing grades, which she explained happened as a result from long hours she maintained working a stressful full-time job and trying to raise her now six-year-old daughter alone. She currently has a domestic partner, and her daughter is old enough to attend elementary school while she works part-time as a substitute teacher in a charter school. Oralia is doing well and earned a “C” in the psychology course. She plans to transfer to one of the state’s flagship institutions but will have to work hard to raise her GPA due to her previous failed courses. Her overall GPA is a 1.46, and she is enrolled part-time. Her parents received their GEDs later in life. Oralia struggled with getting along with her parents because she became pregnant while in high school. She dropped out, and eventually got her GED at an “adult learning center” where she received an award for high academic achievement. She is currently enrolled for fall 2007.

### *Soon Yi*

Soon Yi, a 30 year-old nursing major with an M.D. from Cambodia, is married and raises two small children when she is not in school. She is a part-time student and enrolled in the spring 2007. She quit her job in a factory to attend community college because she was “working for ten dollars an hour and it’s not worth it.” She has felt

frustrated that none of her classes in medicine from Cambodia will transfer to the college. She has maintained a 3.2 GPA. Soon Yi described her biggest challenge was “learning English and finding time to study because I want to spend time with my two children.” Her husband is very supportive of her being in school, but she does not see him much because he has two jobs. Soon Yi described additional stress because her husband does not earn “much money,” so she worries that she will not be able to finish her degree. Soon Yi has a 3.2 GPA and passed the course with a “B.” She is currently enrolled for fall 2007.

### *Angela*

Angela is a native of Mexico and became a citizen seven years ago. She is a 31 year-old mother of four children who raises them with her husband. Angela obtained her GED in 1996 from an alternative school because she got pregnant with her first child at 15 and got married. Her mother is a cafeteria worker who recently got her GED. Angela spoke with tremendous pride that her mother “finally got a high school education,” which she obtained going to night school. As a child, Angela’s father left her and her siblings. He spent years in prison in Mexico and was recently released. She has not seen him since he left so many years ago. Angela feels fortunate that her mother and family are so supportive of her education goals. She wants to become a teacher and is first in her family to go to college. She started her studies in the fall of 2006 as a FTIC student, is enrolled part-time, and works 25+ hours as a translator. Angela has a 1.75 GPA and did not pass the psychology course. She is currently enrolled for fall 2007.

### *Beatriz*

Beatriz is a 31-year old mother of three children, ages 7, 9, and 11. She has been married for 13 years, and her husband has been “very” supportive of her desire to become a nurse. Beatriz enrolled in the fall of 2006 as a part-time student majoring in nursing. She quit a full-time “high-paying” job a couple of years ago to pursue her studies. Beatriz now works part-time as a certified nursing assistant in a nursing home. Regarding her parents’ educational background, her mother grew up illiterate, and her father did not get beyond a high school education. Her siblings have been in and out of prison and have struggled with drug addiction. She remarked that “Instead of being close to my mother and sisters, I stay close to my husband’s relatives but his makes my brothers and sisters think I’m better than they are. I just say I don’t want to end up like them.” Beatriz is first-generation, FTIC student, and has a 1.82 GPA. She did not pass the course. She is currently enrolled for fall 2007.

### *Non-Mainstream Student Participant Profiles*

#### *Hae Jung*

Hae-Jung is a single 20 year-old native of South Korea with plans to become a pharmacist and transfer to an in-state university. She has maintained a 4.0 GPA and is enrolled full-time. She came to the U.S. several months ago with a primary reason for coming to America to “learn English and get a pharmacy degree.” She was the only student participant interviewee who earned an “A” in Dr. Johnson’s course. Her father received his doctorate in electrical engineering, and her mother is a retired school teacher. They reside in South Korea. Her brother is currently studying here in the U.S.

Hae Jung explained that her biggest challenge was “learning English” and missing her home country “very, very, much.” She is currently enrolled for fall 2007.

### *Penelope*

A native of New Mexico, Penelope is a single 21 year-old double major in business administration and accounting who plans to minor in sign language. Penelope is a part-time student who enrolled in the spring of 2007. She had taken courses at New Mexico State University prior to moving to Texas. She is working part-time in a wedding dress shop, but plans to quit so she can devote more time to her studies, which she says are “very important to me.” She has two siblings who both graduated from high school. Her mother is a nurse and her father works in construction, but they do not reside in Texas. Because of her father’s Vietnam veteran status, Penelope receives scholarship assistance. She has maintained a 2.8 GPA and earned a “C” in the psychology course. She is currently enrolled for fall 2007.

### *Trey*

Trey is the only male in the non-mainstream developmental reading class of eight students. Trey enrolled in the fall of 2006 right after he graduated from high school. He is 19 years old, single and a physical education major that had dreams of getting a wrestling scholarship to a smaller university. He lives at home with his mother, and is eager to move out but is having difficulty earning enough money to do that working part-time and earning minimum wage. His mother has a bachelor’s degree, and his father, who did not raise Trey, received a GED and works in construction. His role model is his older brother who was recently hired by a large company as a graphics



designer. Trey spoke of him several times during the course of the interview as his “hero.” Trey was the only student not to pass the developmental reading class. This was his second time to enroll in this course and the psychology class, which he failed also for a second time. He has a .6 GPA. Trey is not enrolled for the fall 2007. He is the only student interviewee who did not persist past the spring semester 2007.

### *Rosa*

Rosa is a native of Texas. She is 18 years old and a recent high school graduate from a local high school. Rosa explained growing up with her two siblings that she didn’t get into trouble, but her brother and sister did. Her sister got pregnant at 15. Her brother did eventually graduate from high school and plans on attending the community college where this study was conducted. Rosa is first-generation, FTIC, and lives at home with her mother and stepfather. She wants to become a veterinarian because she has loved animals her whole life. She enrolled part-time in the spring of 2007 and doesn’t work currently. Her plan is to transfer to one of the flagship institutions. Rosa has maintained a 2.6 GPA. She did not pass the psychology course, and she is currently enrolled for fall 2007.

### *Mariposa*

Mariposa is a 22 year-old native of Mexico who arrived in the U.S. in 1996 and graduated from a local high school in 2004. She is a first-generation student with FTIC status. Unlike her other non-mainstream peers in the developmental reading course (Rosa, Penelope, and Hae Jung) Mariposa works part-time (25+ hours per week) as a nursing assistant while living at home with her family. She has been enrolled full-time

since the summer of 2006. With regard to her parents' educational background, both did not get beyond a first or second grade education because the "situation was very bad in Mexico. They were poor and had to work." Mariposa emphasized that her goal to join the medical field as a nurse was due largely to her father's passion that she obtain an education. "He was putting that in my mind, but not only in my mind, he was also putting that in my heart." Mariposa passed the psychology course with a "C" and has an overall 3.0 GPA, and is currently enrolled for fall 2007.

### *Faculty Participant Profile*

#### *Professor Johnson*

Professor Johnson is an older adult female, is recently divorced, and has one adult son. A native of Michigan, she earned a Ph.D. in psychology over 20 years ago from a major public university. She recalled how "important education was in my family because my father was a professor so my siblings and I are all well educated." She feels that because of this influence, her expectations of community college students were unrealistic when she first arrived on campus in 1999 as an adjunct faculty member. She has taught the introduction to psychology course since she arrived, in addition to teaching developmental math courses and providing tutorial services in the learning labs 15-20 hours weekly. She described her time in the learning labs as "the most fulfilling work I do." This was her second year to teach the mainstream psychology course as a linked courses model. Her life off campus is busy due to her position on a board for a not-for-profit agency that raises money for battered women. She also volunteers a great deal of her time working for an environmental preservation organization.

## **Findings**

Research findings presented used representational quotes from interviewees based on their perspectives, opinions, and perceptions about their academic and socialization experiences in both learning environments inside and outside the classroom(s). When relevant, developmental students were identified as “non-mainstream interviewees” or “non-mainstream student participants,” and mainstream students were identified as “mainstream interviewees” or “mainstream student participants” to distinguish the two groups for comparison purposes, and to set them apart from other students who declined to be interviewed. At times, however, all interviewees collectively were referred to as “interviewees,” “students,” and “participants” when relevant, in particular when themes were presented. The mainstream instructor was referred to as “mainstream instructor participant,” “part-time instructor participant,” and “mainstream adjunct professor participant” when relevant. The developmental reading teacher was referred to as “developmental reading instructor” or “adjunct developmental reading instructor,” as needed.

Sprinkled throughout the explication of interviewee themes were researcher participant observations to enhance and reinforce perceptions and views of the interviewees, providing a counterpoint to their voices derived from direct observation and participation by the researcher.

From the analysis of the interviews, one overarching category materialized that the researcher used to simplify the complexity of the phenomena, and to understand the meaning both classroom dynamics had for both groups of student interviewees and the

adjunct professor participant. This heading is labeled Social and Academic Involvement. The 12 themes below were consequences of recurring clusters of significant meaning statements (Creswell, 1998) that represented all participants' views taken from transcripts of the interviews.

*Social and Academic Involvement Themes Identified by Interviewees in Mainstream and Non-Mainstream Classes*

The following 12 themes were prevalent among views expressed by the 14 student participants and one adjunct professor participant when they described levels of satisfaction, dissatisfaction, participation, and personal effort in their mainstream and non-mainstream learning environment(s).

*Mainstream Classroom Environment Themes*

1. "I'm running to my next class or going to my job"
2. "I'm always studying when I'm not working"
3. "The learning labs are a life-saver"
4. "I should just raise my hand and speak up in class but I never do"
5. "Long lectures"
6. "It's too much information sometimes"
7. "I wasn't prepared for stuff on the exam outside of the handouts"
8. "Students want to be "spoon-fed" the material"
9. "Give us a worksheet or homework 'cause we're just reading, we're not comprehending"

*Non-Mainstream Classroom Environment Themes*

10. "I can be myself and it's comfortable"
11. "I've made friends, and we study together sometimes"
12. "I thought the psychology textbook would be branded in my mind"

Described below are the mainstream social and academic involvement themes from the mainstream class. The non-mainstream social and academic involvement themes will follow.

*Social and Academic Involvement Themes Identified by Interviewees in  
Mainstream Classroom Environment*

*Theme #1: “I’m Running to My Next Class or Going to My Job”*

The majority of mainstream interviewees expressed the inability to socialize on campus or participate in campus-sponsored events or activities due to time constraints. Although the majority of them reported being exceptionally busy, most discussed a lively and connected social life with their personal friends and family outside of school.

Bonnie, the 36 year-old psychology major, related her disappointment that few events on campus were conducive “for women my age.” She is thinking of getting more involved in “student government” for the future.

In terms of campus-wide socializing and participating in events or activities, all five non-mainstream student interviewees, like their mainstream counterparts, were too busy to take part, but the interviews revealed that the younger non-mainstream student participants had more time for themselves as peers to make friendships because of their single status. (This aspect of their socialization experience is discussed in a subsequent theme.) Three non-mainstream student participants had part-time jobs; however, one was planning to quit so she could focus on school. Five of the nine mainstream student participants had part-time or full-time jobs, and five were older adult females raising families; all but one was working.

Overall, eight of the 14 student interviewees had part-time or full-time job obligations. A common response to what interviewees did before and/or after class was to “run to my next class,” “go to my job,” or “go pick up my brother or sister.” The exception was Hae Jung who had come to the U.S. six months previously and did not work but devoted “many hours” per week to studying. In fact, Hae Jung remarked that when meeting other students on campus, it was not uncommon for students to ask, “Where do you work?” As a result, she felt “awkward” because she didn’t have to work and other students did.

Manuel, the young nursing major who did not pass the course and worked full-time, described his personal responsibilities in addition to his parents wanting him to get a postsecondary education: “I have to pay for my car insurance and the Internet...I’m paying for everything in school...because that’s their [his parents] main thing, both of them, education is number one, before work, before anything.”

Like her students, Dr. Johnson, described “limited time as well” because of all of the “grading of tests, working as a tutor in the learning labs 15-20 a week, plus teaching three other courses in addition to being available for students before and after classes.” The participant observer recognized this hectic aspect of Dr. Johnson’s time on campus as well. The hectic schedules of the adjunct professor and her students are discussed in more depth in the Discussion section of Chapter Five.

## *Theme #2 “I’m Always Studying When I’m Not Working”*

A prevailing theme from mainstream student participants who passed the course with a “C” or better was consistent solitary study habits. Some interviewees who did not pass described studying alone, yet with fewer hours overall devoted to studying.

Through her vivid descriptions, Laurel spoke about the difficulty finding time to study with peers or socializing on campus saying that “In general, I study all the time at home when I’m not working...yeah... sometimes I’ll get at home at 4pm, and I’ll study from 4-11pm...in the mean time, I have to see what we’re going to have for supper...I have my mom that lives with me too, so I take care of my mom also.”

The rest of the mainstream and non-mainstream interviewees who passed reported daily study habits created around jobs, family, and other obligations. “Studying in between work and school” was a common response for mainstream student interviewees. Raul, the 19-year-old engineering major who passed the course, described his best time to study was after attending classes and driving his siblings to their various activities. Raul had to be up by 5am to take his siblings to school. Once home, he would sleep for a few hours then “get up around 8pm and study for at least three to four hours.” Bonnie studied “eight to 10 hours per week just for psychology.” She went on to observe her own academic growth commenting, “That’s now that I’ve started to understand to study, before I did not know how to study.” Of all the interviewees who passed with a “C” or better, only Oralia claimed that hours devoted to studying as her peers described were not necessary, at least not for now. She felt confident of getting a “C” with little or no studying, which she did earn, even though she claimed she was “half-assing it right

now...and wanted to enjoy life too.” She and her mainstream peer, Soon Yi, are the only two student participants who did not require remedial education.

On average, all nine mainstream student interviewees who passed studied a minimum of four hours weekly for the mainstream psychology class with the lowest amount 30 minutes per week, and the highest amount of hours invested 12 hours weekly.

Non-mainstream interviewees who passed averaged about the same number of weekly hours, approximately four hours weekly devoted to studying for the mainstream psychology class. The exceptions were Beatriz, Angela, and Rosa. They did not pass the course but described many hours devoted to studying. Dr. Johnson revealed during her interview that she was “truly surprised and felt bad” that Rosa did not pass the course because she had passed her exams prior to the final. Rosa remarked about her inability to study with this self-observation: “Keeping up with the homework and studying is really hard for me.”

In Trey’s description of his effort to study for tests, he mentioned that he “never studied” because he could not concentrate. He further revealed in the interview being in special education courses throughout elementary school, and was identified as being dyslexic. For all the student participants who didn’t pass, when asked by the researcher if they sought help from tutors or the mainstream or developmental instructors, all made similar comments to the effect that they were “independent,” did things “on my own,” and would not go and see the mainstream instructor. This reluctance, for whatever reasons, may have kept one or more of them from passing.



In sum, of the 14 interviewees who participated in this study, nine (64%) passed the mainstream psychology class. Of the nine mainstream student participants, six (67%) passed the course. Of the five non-mainstream student participants, three (60%) passed. For an overall average of the 25 students who enrolled in the mainstream psychology class, 12 students (48%) passed. Of the eight mainstream students not interviewed, two of those students (25%) passed, and of the three non-mainstream students not interviewed, one additional student passed. All students but Trey passed the developmental reading course.

*Theme #3: “The Learning Labs Are a Lifesaver”*

The importance of peer relationships and learning labs usage indicated throughout the interviews was where the most variation between groups was revealed. Compared to the non-mainstream cohort, six of the nine mainstream student participants used the institutional resource of the learning labs during previous semesters and the current semester of study. “Without the labs I would never have passed my [remedial] math or freshman comp class,” epitomizes the resourcefulness of the learning labs, in particular for the mainstream older females. Two mainstream participants reported learning labs were occasionally understaffed, but the six who did use the labs, did so multiple times per week to receive assistance in other classes, in particular classes in developmental math, writing, and freshman-level English composition. Laurel, the divorced single mom majoring in nursing, described why learning labs were so useful to her and other students she knew:

*The learning lab was a lifesaver...* it's just other students who have passed the class...and they did real well...they help you. Some are faculty...but most are students...it's really neat because they're going through what you're going through and it hasn't been that long and I had to go to freshman English, which is not my subject, writing papers is not my subject, and I was getting very frustrated, and thought I was going to have to drop it or fail, and I couldn't do either because of my grants and stuff...and so I had totally forgotten about tutoring...and they come at the beginning of the class each semester and they'll introduce somebody and give us sheets about it, and I went down there, and I was there everyday for the last two-and-a-half weeks getting help, and they don't tell you the answers, and they explain it better.

Bonnie, also in her thirties, echoed this feeling that, "When you go to the learning lab, the feeling you get there is like, you really get motivated to get into learning...and it was very helpful for me." Shakira, the 21 year-old majoring in special education, had not used the learning lab during the current semester because her husband had helped her previously in developmental math, so she didn't need to go to the lab. She acknowledged she would start next semester as soon as he returned to work.

Of the five non-mainstream students, Rosa used the lab "12 hours per week." The remaining four non-mainstream students did not use the tutoring labs. Two felt they "didn't need to" with Hae Jung admonishing herself by saying, "I mean...I know I need to." Mariposa, the young single nursing major, did visit one of the learning labs but complained that

...I was trying to get some help in math, and came to the campus...and they know the answers right away...they don't give you the step...they just right away give it to you...and that wasn't a lot of help for me... I was confused how they got the answer.

Perhaps if Mariposa had returned to the lab on a different day, or had attended a lab on a different campus her experience would have been more positive.

In addition, the resourcefulness of the learning labs was evidenced by Dr. Johnson, who, in addition to teaching four classes tutored in the learning labs 15-20 hours per week. She made this observation of the learning exchange between students and teachers in that environment:

It [learning lab] truly is **the ideal learning community** because students can work at their own pace, and then when they need help or have questions and need an explanation, someone is right there to help them. Students don't feel shy to ask questions in the lab because they know that's the place where they are supposed to go for help...so the stigma of feeling inadequate is removed. I'm proud to work there because students would never feel bad and an instructor would never make a student feel that way.

This may be true especially for individuals who are shy or reluctant to speak in front of groups. Dr. Johnson expressed her preference was "one-on-one teaching" in the learning labs.

Finally, Dr. Johnson remarked that students were "so appreciative in the lab...even giving me cards of thanks for my assistance and help...I really enjoy my work here in the lab." From her perceptions on her role and the student's role in the learning labs, Dr. Johnson understood instinctively why students may have felt more comfortable working one-on-one in the labs, which helped to make them feel more comfortable and less intimidated in a large classroom setting. Plus, the reason learning labs are there for students is to provide supplemental instruction.

*Theme #4: "I Should Just Raise My Hand in Class and Speak Up But I Never Do"*

A pattern of silence from almost all students, including mainstream and non-mainstream interviewees, was observed by the participant researcher throughout the semester of study in Dr. Johnson's class. Dr. Johnson was aware also of this behavior,

and her perspectives on this particular linked courses model class compared to other stand-alone psychology courses she taught are brought forth in a subsequent section of this study. Twelve of the 14 interviewees expressed some dissatisfaction with their levels of participation inside a classroom size of 25 students. Seven of the nine mainstream participants and all five non-mainstream participants shared feelings of intimidation, “embarrassment,” and/or “fear of being judged.” Asking questions in the mainstream learning environment was rare.

Bonnie observed some reasons for this silence, and the power of this motif is evidenced below from her observation:

I think that students did not speak up much in class for a number of reasons, most of them were pretty young and probably have not had enough experience to share, some are just there to get the course out of the way to move on to the next class on the list of their required courses for the program. Many of them I don't think were majoring in Psychology, and I am, so I have a lot of interest. Others were shy or embarrassed, and the instructor was quite timid and not always clear in her explanations. It took me a little while to realize what I needed to do to pass the class.

Oralia reinforced this perception saying that “Students are afraid to ask questions and say what they think.” Like Bonnie, Oralia expressed her ideas during the course of the interviews in an articulate fashion, and she is interested also in psychology with dreams of becoming a social worker or political activist.

In interview after interview, the majority of interviewees made similar remarks that illustrated their reluctance to participate and speak up in the mainstream classroom with phrases like, “I’m too scared...I don’t want to keep asking questions like over and over again.” Raul remarked, “In high school you’ve been in school at the same place

with everybody and you know each other, it's a different atmosphere here, it all changes, and everything like that." Beatriz, the older married nursing major who did not pass the course, said that "I hesitate to answer, because I'm like *okay*... I don't want to say the wrong thing and then ask a question, and everybody will be like, 'Ah.'"

Echoing the majority of their mainstream counterparts, all five non-mainstream participants made specific reference to feeling "embarrassed," "shy," or reluctant to raise their hand in the mainstream class. Rosa, and her peer, Penelope, saw raising their hand as a sign of "stupidity," being "dumb," or wasting their peers' time. Both Rosa and Penelope were non-mainstream student participants enrolled in the developmental reading class. The participant researcher reinforced Rosa and Penelope's perceptions by observing that throughout the semester when Dr. Johnson would ask students if they did not understand part of her lecture, never once did a mainstream or developmental student raise their hand while the participant researcher was in attendance. Penelope highlighted the collective perceptions of her peers with this observation of the larger classroom environment:

When there is a bigger class people are more shier [sic] to raise their hand compared to smaller classes, cause they're a little bit homey, and then you're able to ask questions even if they don't come out correctly. You don't feel like an idiot, that's why you don't want to raise your hand [in the mainstream class].

Rosa echoed this feeling and added, "I *could* kinda just raise my hand and have the wrong answer...yeah right...and the thing is... [laughing]... when somebody did finally give the answer, I'm like, that was my answer! And, I should just raise my hand, but I never do." Their other peer in the non-mainstream class, Mariposa, made the following

comparison between the mainstream and non-mainstream classes: “So we’re knowing each other a little bit in the reading class and with Professor Johnson, we never do that [referring to the mainstream psychology classroom environment]...and whenever she asks us to share something we never wanna do that.” Shakira described how she did interact occasionally with her peers remarking, “Hmm...I made some acquaintances, people like Joe, and the Cambodian girl [Soon Yi] who sits next to me.

From an observation by the participant researcher, student interviewees were the most attentive and engaged when their peers in the mainstream class shared personal hardships. Bonnie, Beatriz, and Oralia, all mainstream participants who were the more vocal students, did speak up on occasion, and their comments and stories were poignant. As a result, these stories from students generated some empathy from peers and inspired other occasional testimonies or questions.

Likewise, Dr. Johnson attempted to create an informal classroom dynamic through anecdotal teaching, and by sharing more intimate stories of her personal life as a pedagogical tool to understand emotional and psychological disorders. This benefited interested students and made them feel more comfortable and less inhibited from engaging in some discussion, according to direct observations from the participant researcher. A few mainstream and developmental students who declined to be interviewed contributed more forthrightly than the student interviewees. Another pertinent observation by the researcher was that more times than not, however, several students appeared apathetic and even bored during parts of those observed class

sessions. Some would look out the window or work on different class assignments, as noted by the researcher sitting next to some students. One student slept regularly.

When interviewees were asked to compare their classroom experiences overall, several reported that they behaved differently in other classes, and they and their peers were more lively and participative in other classes. Shakira observed that “Some classes everybody talks and everything... like my math class...but this class is totally different. Everybody keeps to themselves.” Rosa mentioned that because she had never had a “college-level” class before, she didn’t have the benefit of comparing previous college classes to her experiences in the psychology class.

#### *Theme #5: “Long Lectures”*

While the majority of student participants registered some complaints about the “long lectures” and course-overload, most possessed a pleasant disposition toward the teacher who was a “kind” person in the classroom. Student participants were able to be fond of the individual and not always like the teaching, and could distinguish the two. Four student interviewees “liked Dr. Johnson’s teaching,” and Bonnie expressed interest in the subject matter, liked the class overall, as did a couple of other interviewees, including Oralia who thought psychology was “interesting and cool.” Penelope made a strong connection to how the course material applied to her everyday life:

I’ve learned that it’s [psychology] is just tied with everything with life and behavior and I have a better understanding of that. So I can understand other people. This class has helped with understanding different behaviors and even myself.

Furthermore, all student participants appreciated Dr. Johnson's expertise in the subject area. The non-mainstream participants, in particular, appreciated the mainstream instructor's organizational skills, syllabus, and handouts, which they contrasted with their experiences in the developmental reading class. These elements were missing in the developmental reading course, according to non-mainstream interviewees, and will be addressed later in a subsequent academic involvement theme.

Even so, the majority of student participants' descriptions of their learning experience in the mainstream classroom were characterized by feelings of being uncomfortable or dissatisfied with Dr. Johnson lecturing as the dominant mode of teaching and course delivery. Ten of the student participants' complaints pertained to specific pedagogical and curricular areas that cut across both groups with little variation. These disparities were relayed during the course of interviews, and from direct participant researcher observations in the classroom throughout the semester of study. Shakira was one of most attentive students, took copious notes but "hated the lectures."

Four other mainstream and non-mainstream participants remarked how Dr. Johnson spent too much time telling the students personal anecdotes with little connection to the subject matter at hand, as was evidenced in their interviews and from participant observation from the researcher. Beatriz and Penelope, however, "really liked" the personal stories and the meaning they had for them. Oralia, Penelope, Hae Jung, and Soon Yi appreciated portions of Dr. Johnson's lectures and thought she was a "really good" teacher. Penelope reinforced their positive feeling about Dr. Johnson's



teaching by remarking, “I really like Dr. Johnson. I think she knows her material very well. I would recommend her class to any other student. I like her pace.”

Overall, from student participants’ observations their levels of dissatisfaction would improve if Dr. Johnson would have been more “efficient” and “organized” during class by encouraging more discussion during her lectures. This would mean Dr. Johnson needed sensitivity to her audience including a discerning eye on how responsive her audience was to her anecdotal teaching habits. At other times, however, her stories added interesting and rich insights to her presentations, according to direct participant researcher observations and student participants.

Interestingly enough, after every class period, Dr. Johnson asked students to fill out “feedback cards anonymously” so she could improve the classroom environment. From an observation by the participant researcher, after a couple of weeks of collecting feedback cards, Dr. Johnson shared student criticism that she “stop telling so many personal stories during class time.” From observations by the participant observer over the course of the semester, Dr. Johnson slipped back into her habit of sharing personal stories, yet it was obvious this was not intentional.

Another pervasive view among the majority of student participants was the feeling that Dr. Johnson’s explanations of concepts/terms should have been delivered in a “simpler vocabulary.” It should be noted that during the course of the interview with her, this aspect of her teaching was raised. She addressed students’ complaints about the amount of content to be learned by acknowledging the inherent challenge of dissemination of the course material established by her chair of the department, while

adapting the curriculum to fit the needs of students. This aspect of course delivery is addressed with the next academic involvement theme.

*Theme #6: “It’s Too Much Information Sometimes”*

One of the more compelling observations made by Dr. Johnson had to do with the departmental curriculum requirement, which she had little control over as a part-time faculty member. She felt it “was too much...I’m always scrambling to cover the curriculum that is required...and I even switched to a truncated version of the textbook.” This phrase was echoed by the majority of mainstream and developmental student participants. Mariposa’s comment sums up their collective frustration: “It’s too much...very, very, hard to learn four chapters.” Dr. Johnson felt the need “to cover the material” swiftly with little time devoted to student involvement, in-class assignments or discussions that several student interviewees would have “appreciated.” Dr. Johnson expressed she felt intense pressure to “teach the entire curriculum.” Students were not always actively involved in learning the course material, which was observed directly by the participant observer.

Thus, the majority of student participants expressed “how difficult” it was to learn the course material. Mainstream and non-mainstream student participants alike expressed certain expectations that the course content would be “easier than it was”. From direct classroom observations, Dr. Johnson expected her audience to understand a vocabulary commensurate with a collegiate-level course, if not a bit more sophisticated, given the complexity and rigor within the behavioral sciences. This aspect of the curriculum was lost on her audience on occasion as was observed directly by the

participant researcher. Mariposa, who was not a native English speaker and passed the course, provided additional insights: “She [Dr. Johnson] is doing a good job; it’s just that it’s too much information to cover sometimes. When it’s very hard and complicated like [sic] some of the words, the vocabulary, we don’t have a chance to talk because she’s always doing the lectures.

With all this in mind, the perspective of Soon Yi, the mainstream student who was educated in a non-Western educational system is noteworthy. She gave her perspective on her own personal expectations of the class, which was commensurate with a more traditional university classroom setting:

You know the educational system here in this country is completely different. Over there [Cambodia] they want you to learn all by yourself, over here, they break down the steps...you can learn a lot easier here to [sic] understand... all the teachers over there, they don’t care much about students...when you go to college, you’re on your own. They point out important the [sic] big goal of the lesson, and you [sic] just on your own, you go do research.

Soon Yi’s level of education was more advanced than some of her peers, even with her limited English. Hae Jung and Penelope, like Soon Yi, expressed less dissatisfaction with this aspect of the mainstream class, and Hae Jung observed, “The teacher is really good... if there is a problem, it is just myself [sic], and her explanations are good enough. Similar to Soon Yi’s expectation, Dr. Johnson during the interview expressed how she had “adapted her teaching style from when I first arrived on this campus back in 1999 because I thought of them [freshman-level community college students] as freshman students where I attended school.

*Theme #7: “I Wasn’t Prepared for Stuff on the Exams Outside of the Handouts”*

The majority of all exams were multiple choice including one or two essays. Course content covered per exam was roughly three or four chapters of a freshman-level psychology textbook. Dr. Johnson was quick to point out that the test was constructed for students to use critical thinking skills and was not just a rote memorization exercise, so she included several questions and items on the test not covered on the handouts, which meant students needed to cover the psychology textbook as well. From an observation by the participant researcher, Dr. Johnson did remind her students that they would need to “go over the textbook as well as prepare.” Yet, most pronounced levels of confusion or misunderstandings from student participants had to do with components and requirements of the first exam. Mariposa reflected her sophisticated view about some of the questions on the exam: “I couldn’t understand the meaning, [regarding the test]...it was like if you don’t know the meaning, you miss the whole point.” Expressing the same view about the exam, Manuel said, “There are things I knew, and then there was like, *what?* ‘What is she [Dr. Johnson] asking here, you know?’”

Seven mainstream student participants and one non-mainstream student participant (64%) either “didn’t understand the essay portion of the first exam” or what Dr. Johnson was looking for conceptually, or were “not prepared for stuff outside of the handouts” for the first exam. Eleven mainstream and non-mainstream student participants out of 14 student interviewees (79%) failed the first exam. Seven (78%) of the nine mainstream student participants did not pass the first test. This included Shakira, Manuel, Raul, Beatriz, Bonnie, Oralia, and Angela. Soon Yi and Laurel passed.

Of the non-mainstream participants, Penelope, Hae Jung, and Rosa passed the first exam. Trey and Mariposa did not pass the exam.

Unlike her non-mainstream peers, Mariposa visited Dr. Johnson to find out why she had failed, retested and passed. This interaction with the instructor undoubtedly helped Mariposa to pass the course because she was able then on to pass all subsequent exams and the final. Bonnie (on the second exam) and Soon Yi also (before the first exam) took the initiative to visit Dr. Johnson for help. Few of the interviewees visited Dr. Johnson to find out why they failed and what they could do to improve, however. Dr. Johnson reported that of the 14 students interviewed and the rest of the class, only a few came to visit her, but the majority of students in the class did not follow-up. A noteworthy point was Dr. Johnson's availability after class and during office hours, and the majority of student participants appreciated this interaction. This became an important element to some students' success, in particular when needing to review how to take the exams.

The majority of both mainstream and non-mainstream student participants were able to retest (part of the instructor policy with a students' attendance averaged into the retest score). Eventually, four passed the first retest (Oralia, Beatriz, Raul, and Mariposa), but two did not retest on the first exam (Bonnie and Shakira) because they were confused equally about Dr. Johnson's policy on retesting and thought they were not eligible. Both Bonnie and Shakira passed the course, however, and passed subsequent exams. It should be noted that Bonnie spent a good deal of time following-up with the instructor to learn how to adapt to Dr. Johnson's style of exams:

What the deal was that the communication wasn't too clear with the instructor and I went to her and we talked and that helped me get myself in line and understand how she operates because on the first test, I failed my first test...but I told her I didn't know how to study for this test, so she went over the information...and I figured out a little process of following along on that and when it came to the test, I didn't know about how the cheat sheet worked, and I asked her before and about the guidelines, which I didn't get straight answers on, because it was the only thing on the syllabus is that it's one sheet...and I can get more if I type it front and back instead of writing it...I didn't see anyone using cheat sheets on the first test.

The prevailing view from Dr. Johnson about why her students failed the exam was to do partly with students' expecting not to have to use critical thinking skills or synthesize the material in a meaningful way. This subsequent theme is addressed in the next section.

Dr. Johnson mentioned "a colleague who posted actual exams online as a practice exam before the test." Dr. Johnson believed this practice was wrong and wanted students to think critically—on their own—though students were given the additional aid of a cheat sheet.

*Theme #8: "Students Want to Be "Spoon-Fed" the Material"*

Compared to student participant expectations, Dr. Johnson made several references to how students "expected to be spoon-fed the curriculum," and did not put forth the requisite "effort to pass the course." She expected students to attend her class "consistently and prepare for exams." Dr. Johnson noted a "high level" of absenteeism from students in this particular linked courses class compared to the same course she offered on a different campus where students rarely missed. She noted also the class participation levels and test scores were higher from students on a different campus. Dr. Johnson observed the following:

Student skill levels are higher and more of them pass on the other campus where I teach the same class [as a stand-alone course, *emphasis added by researcher*]... I get much more positive evaluations on [name intentionally left out] campus...they [students] also join in the discussion and really seem to like the subject at hand...I think what may help any student pass has generally to do with attendance, purchasing the text book, meeting with me, and studying.

Based on her keen insights into factors that contribute to overall student success in the classroom, Dr. Johnson had taught psychology as a core requirement stand-alone course for years to students, and she spent hours creating chapter summary handouts for students some years earlier to help students comprehend the textbook. The handouts contained a detailed summary distilling important concepts and terms for students, and were generally three to four pages in length. Therefore, it should not be assumed that Dr. Johnson created chapter summary handouts exclusively for the linked courses model that was the subject of this study. Students were allowed also to compose and use cheat sheets for the exams, one 8 x 11 page, front and back. Allowing students to create personal cheat sheets was evidenced by the participant researcher who reviewed several mainstream and non-mainstream students' cheat sheets, which were generally written in tiny, almost unintelligible print. Several student interviewees boasted they had "spent hours writing" them. Her course handouts and cheat sheets were obvious measures to help students make those adjustments to understand the concepts and course content.

From this researcher's perspective, the chapter summary handouts were an excellent resource, in particular for students who may have been pressed for time to study from the textbook or did not comprehend how certain terms and concepts were defined in the book. Penelope praised them by saying, "Her [Dr. Johnson's] handouts

are very helpful...she takes the whole textbook and summarizes it down.” As a participant observer in the classroom, without the chapter summary handouts and cheat sheets, more students would have failed the class because of the large amount of content to be absorbed. With the cheat sheet, rote memorization was less a necessity and this exercise probably involved more of a value judgment by interviewees as to what material was important enough to be tested on.

Both the cheat sheets and chapter summary handouts became the rough equivalent of the holy grail for all the student interviewees and Dr. Johnson. She relayed in her interview, “I wrote those handouts years ago, and so it saves me tremendous time, although they have to be updated.” Most praise by all student participants focused on that aspect of pedagogical aids.

*Theme #9: “Give Us a Worksheet or Homework ‘Cause We’re Just Reading, We’re Not Comprehending”*

The majority of student participants favored unanimously being given in-class assignments or other pedagogical tools to attract students to the course content. Oralia mentioned Dr. Johnson could put out a “survey to make students feel more comfortable speaking up in class and feel more familiar.” Two participants, one mainstream and one non-mainstream interviewee, shared similar feelings by saying that “I don’t understand a lot of what she’s saying...the handouts are pretty good, but some stuff she covers [during lectures] aren’t on the notes, and I get lost.” In addition, because Dr. Johnson would, according to several students, “go off on her stories” to a point that, as Laurel pointed out, “Talking about your personal life [referring to Dr. Johnson] to a point does



help [us] understand what she's teaching, it's just I already know because she repeats her stories...and I don't need to know." Levels of dissatisfaction from interviewees in this regard were characterized with Mariposa's observation, "Give us some assignments that have to do with the course just to practice...in psychology, just a little homework."

Beatriz laughed at herself when she requested "homework" adding:

Give us a worksheet, or homework, cause we're just reading, we're not comprehending...like the reviews she gives us, she just gives us the information like we're reading along with her, highlighting, like if she left some of those blank [concepts and terms on the handout], then we'd have to follow in our book, and say, 'It's this', and we'd have to answer.

Angela observed that "She [the instructor] has a hard time explaining some things...it would be better to find a way to explain things and provide more examples and give us some hands-on training." Although Oralia appreciated Dr. Johnson's lectures, the reluctance from her peers to engage and involve themselves in the classroom dynamic was obvious to her. She reflected how perhaps "they" [meaning her less participative peers] would benefit from a different teaching style: "Every class could have two lectures or two different teachers to communicate [the material]."

Other student participants mentioned other classes that had "group activities" and in-class "assignments." Laurel brought up a project in another class that required an in-class presentation in front of students, which she said "developed her sense of self-confidence" in the classroom. Others, however, Oralia and Beatriz, for example, pointed out that collaborative learning wasn't necessarily a plus because students put in groups are different ages and then, "Nobody in the group knows what to say to each other." (Similar age was a feature of the non-mainstream community cohort, and students

identified this as a reason they felt comfortable around one another.) Furthermore, Oralia brought up the issue of “students loafing” and always one student “doing all the work” when students worked collaboratively. Here is Bonnie contrasting her experience in Dr. Johnson’s classroom with her Spanish instructor’s:

Well, like in my Spanish class, the one I took *previously* because I had to take it twice, the instructor at that time was very expressive and funny...and really worked with you and after class and drill you...and assignments you could do on your own...and we got into groups and we also did little skits, and that was helpful and interesting. The instructor *now* is more of a challenge; her teaching style is very old-fashioned, more like little kids in the class or something.

Bonnie reported this behavior to the campus dean, and as a result, Bonnie observed:

And I see that she [current Spanish instructor] has a better attitude and respects each individual, and I think she’s starting to see that she gets a better response from the class, and we’re able to take in and respond to what she’s teaching us.

According to several student participants, their dissatisfaction in the classroom resulted sometimes in unclear expectations from Dr. Johnson in terms of her class policies, exams, and how she delivered the course material. Bonnie’s observation summed up several student participants’ dissatisfaction:

You know, it would be helpful to have a better explanation of what her [the instructor] expectations are in class and be forward on why she has things the way she has them...the retest, attendance and that type of thing. And, instead of explaining something again every time someone entered late, save it as a final review at the end of class and that covers everything.

Conversely, Dr. Johnson felt that she was “clear, concise, and easy-to-understand” by providing students detailed chapter summary handouts, a meticulous syllabus, and “multiple verbal explanations” before classes would begin regarding her “policies on exams, attendance, and course assignments.” Review of these unobtrusive

data by the researcher and personal observations in the classroom confirmed her descriptions. Some students, of the 25 who were enrolled, would often miss these explanations and handouts due to absences or tardiness. Tardiness was a chronic problem throughout the semester for some students enrolled in the course. A few would come 40 minutes late into the 80-minute class period. This behavior was more prevalent at the beginning of the semester when Dr. Johnson showed up five minutes late to her own classes. Some students complained, and she started showing up on time, better prepared, and requested students do the same, yet students came late still to class. Two students who came chronically late to every class were Trey and Manuel. Both did not pass the mainstream course.

This ends the mainstream social and academic involvement themes section of this study. Written below are the non-mainstream social and academic involvement themes identified by non-mainstream student interviewees in the smaller developmental classroom.

*Social and Academic Involvement Themes in the Non-Mainstream Classroom Environment*

*Theme #10: "I Can Be Myself and Its Comfortable"*

In terms of interaction and socialization with the adjunct developmental reading instructor, it should be noted that all non-mainstream interviewees reported the adjunct developmental reading instructor, Ms. Carlton, was readily available before and after class, during office hours, and always available on email. Students highlighted this aspect of their experience with her, and they were most appreciative of her availability.

Rosa commented that “She returns my emails right away, and she’ll always meet with me when I need help.”

The opportunity for non-mainstream students to compare their smaller classroom environment with the larger mainstream environment produced interesting and poignant perceptions in terms of affective behaviors affected by both classroom learning environments. The non-mainstream students felt appreciably more comfortable in the smaller cohort of eight students, and talked with each other in the smaller class. “It’s easy to ask questions and be myself” was a dominant social involvement theme for the non-mainstream cohort.

This aspect of their affective behavior was brought to the attention of the interviewees by the participant observer in casual conversations and in the interviews. From their perspectives and views, a dominant feeling was that the reasons they rarely spoke to one another in the mainstream class or asked questions was because the feeling in that environment was “uncomfortable” and they did not want to “embarrass” themselves as was mentioned previously.

Another pervasive feeling among the majority of non-mainstream interviewees was a sense of camaraderie and “comfort” that developed over time due to the “smaller” size of the developmental reading classroom. This perception was reinforced by four of the five non-mainstream interviewees who expressed they could “give their opinions freely” opposed to the larger mainstream psychology class, which was roughly triple the size with 25 students. Hae Jung and Mariposa regarded the emotional safety of the smaller developmental classroom dynamic being in large part due to similar ages of their

peers who were in their early twenties. Mariposa explained that “We’re all girls except for one.” And Hae Jung said that “It was very comfortable to say something, and share experiences.”

According to two non-mainstream participants, individual attention from Ms. Carlton was readily available in the smaller developmental classroom environment. She was a “nurturing” teacher. This perception of the climate of the smaller non-mainstream class is strengthened by Penelope’s remark: “It’s okay to make mistakes and sound like a total idiot...and she [Ms. Carlton] won’t make you feel like a total idiot, and she’ll just explain it to you.” Rosa echoed with, “When we speak up, she [Ms. Carlton] can focus on each of us, and we can give our opinions, and we’re just girls and we feel comfortable with each other.” Furthermore, Penelope summed up generally how students act toward one another around the campus: “I think people rarely introduce themselves to each other, or even if we’re in the elevator there’s a silence, know that I mean? But we all go to school together.”

Satisfaction from the majority of non-mainstream interviewees in the smaller learning environment reinforced the need for students to feel familiar and safe within a setting conducive to openness, shared inquiry, and the potential for shared knowledge within that classroom dynamic. Encouragement from Ms. Carlton to create a rapport for students to feel comfortable and worthy of response was evident from four of the five non-mainstream interviewee’s responses. Trey, the one male non-mainstream student in the entire class of eight students felt differently saying that “Ms. Carlton singled me

out.” Trey, being the only male in the classroom of eight females, may have felt more self-conscious because of his gender.

*Theme # 11: “I’ve Made Friends, and We Study Together Sometimes*

One recurring motif that surfaced during interviews with the non-mainstream interviewees was the friendships and subsequent study trio that had developed with Hae Jung, Mariposa, and Penelope who were all single females with ages ranging from 19-22. All three expressed the “importance of friendships” in their experience in the smaller cohort. Mariposa judged that “Friends are very important... I would say they [friendships] are very important because I learn from other people...I don’t know...it’s just something that would be very helpful once we graduate...we can help each other for evaluations.” In addition, Penelope observed:

There are students who would rather go to lunch in between classes, and just waste time, and check out guys, but that’s not me...you know what I mean...so I tend to hang out with [Hae Jung]...she’s from another country and I can learn from her...it’s something I want her to rub off on me...so that’s what I tend to do with friendships.

Hae Jung remarked that “Sometimes we [referring to Penelope and Mariposa] don’t hang out because our schedules are different...but we’ll call each other and see how we’re doing, plus we study together sometimes.” These relationships were described on campus in the following way by Penelope who recalled, “Yeah...usually once we walk out of class, I’m talking to Hae Jung all the way to the library and we hang out there and study.” Hae Jung relayed that although she was a full-time student and had met other students, currently she studied occasionally with “Penelope and Mariposa,” and that was somewhat difficult because they lived “very far apart.”

The friendship trio of Penelope, Hae Jung, and Mariposa, plus Rosa's description of how she also made a friendship in the smaller cohort with another female non-mainstream peer (who was not a participant in the study) reinforces the potency of peer interaction in a smaller cohort setting, an essential feature of learning communities. Rosa mentioned her new friend as my "role model because she is so smart, and does so well in the psychology class, we went to the library once, and I invited her to my brother's birthday party." The pervasive feeling among four of the five non-mainstream interviewees was that strong peer connections were a result of the smaller classroom environment. Hae Jung's observation portrays a vivid image of how important peers can be to young college students, in particular when they are from another country:

Friends are very important. I can't live alone. I like to make friends and meet new people. When I came here first, I didn't know anybody. I was like...uhmm...I was not scared because when I came here in airplane, I think I will meet new people, make new life, meet foreigners, learn English...and because I have opportunity to make friends.

Compared to their mainstream counterparts, the four non-mainstream young single female students invariably had more time to socialize with each other and develop friendships and study partners. Similar to the mainstream student participants, however, none reported attending or joining any campus-wide activities, groups, or events.

In describing their relationships, all agreed those friendships would not have developed in the larger mainstream environment because of the way in which the larger classroom made them feel "uncomfortable." From perceptions and comments about the intimate nature of the smaller cohort, each sought out the other as a resource to help their overall success in school. The connections the non-mainstream interviewees made

allowed them greater socialization opportunities with peers in the smaller developmental cohort.

*Theme #12: “I Thought the Psychology Textbook Would Be Branded in My Mind”*

The linked courses model offering at the two-year institution was described as “a mega-lab for students” by a counselor on the campus where the study was conducted. That perception reinforces the institution’s developmental education plan’s objective for linked courses models that stipulated the hybrid courses were created to “reinforce learning through shared content and skills” so developmental students would have this additional instructional supplement.

The phrase from two student participants, “It is linked...but honestly we don’t do nothing [sic] related to psychology” was the leitmotif to describe a consistent lack of shared content and skills in the developmental reading course, according to the five non-mainstream participants in a class of eight students. Commenting about potential success using the linked courses model, Penelope said:

She [the developmental reading instructor] explained how we were going to use the psychology textbook in the beginning and so I thought it [psychology curriculum] would be *branded in my mind*. I was expecting my psychology class would be just the lecture class, and note-taking, and the reading class would be the understanding of the different elements of psychology, meaning sleep disorders to emotional disorders, you know, understanding it, and being able to read quickly and how to notate and annotate for this class.

Penelope connected her expectations to her disappointment:

I would think that it would flow together, [linked courses] but they’re very weird apart, I would have expected at least 70 percent [usage of the psychology textbook]... to a very minimum are we learning from the textbook.



To highlight this lack of communication between instructors, Rosa pointed out, that “The one chapter in the psychology textbook we covered in reading class, our psychology teacher skipped that chapter.” All five non-mainstream student participants recalled the class spent a substantial amount of time using the Internet. Echoing the use of the Internet, Mariposa said, “I feel that my *reading* class is *something else* class, and it’s just a lot of Google. Still, the benefits of the smaller class size were not forgotten, even amid constructive feedback with this observation from Mariposa:

Sometimes I like it in there because we can talk more in there, we are knowing each other a little bit more in there, but the other side, on the other hand, we’re not learning, it’s not helping us [paired course model] a lot with psychology...we don’t get a lot of additional help for classes.

These comments and observations from the non-mainstream student participants brought forth the lack of shared course content and skill development from the psychology textbook. More important, student participants expected this to happen. According to all non-mainstream student participants, this expectation was reinforced as a result of being told by Ms. Carlton that “We are going to use this psychology textbook.” Plus, a couple of non-mainstream student participants remarked that their counselor and/or advisor encouraged enrollment because the “learning community links two courses” so that students learn the material better. Of the eight developmental students enrolled in the psychology course, a total of four students passed the course. The other 50% did not.

From Dr. Johnson’s perspective participating as an adjunct faculty member in a linked courses model, her view was that she could have been more “proactive” herself to

improve the level of integration of the curriculum, and that she did not put forth “much effort beyond” agreeing to participate. Her expectation was that the level of integration rested upon the developmental reading instructor’s “willingness and enthusiasm” to use the psychology textbook in the developmental reading class. Dr. Johnson characterized her own minimal collaboration by making the following observation: “I lack the necessary time to invest because of the long hours I currently spend on campus teaching here and in the learning labs...I’m an adjunct, not a full-time professor.” It is noteworthy that Ms. Carlton, like Dr. Johnson, is an adjunct instructor and tutors many hours weekly in the learning labs.

Highlighting the different experiences of other faculty who teach in linked courses models or course clusters on different campuses, in conversations with the participant observer, they described the “additional amount of time and dedication” required to create a learning community that included more times than not a shared syllabus, shared textbooks, some integrated projects, scheduling tasks, and meeting to discuss struggling “under-prepared students.” Once the overall curriculum design and planning had been established, then “the amount of time needed was much less.” Even so, the majority of faculty did express that “emails and phone calls” were necessary to follow-up and stay updated with each other logistically, or see how some students were doing. One full-time faculty member discussed the history of learning communities with the participant researcher, and mentioned that they began as a “grass-roots” level effort on the part of faculty, and were not mandated by the school. In addition, “a paid course-release hour and small stipend” was appropriated years ago when learning communities

were first getting started, but those incentives were eliminated due to budget cuts. One full-time faculty member who teaches the same linked courses model as Dr. Johnson expressed less effort on their part because the stipend and course-release hour had been eliminated.

### **Summary**

Chapter Four presented an overview, student participant profiles, a rationale for coding the data plus rigorous analysis. Consequently, 12 social and academic involvement themes emerged from the interview transcripts. Student participants' perceptions pertained mostly to how they saw themselves interacting (or not) with their peers, and how they perceived themselves participating or not in both classroom environments. Overall, their assumptions and expectations about the class and the quality of teaching were interwoven into a tapestry of inter-subjective experiences. Furthermore, for some student participants who passed and who did not, their educational aspirations were connected to how they saw their learning more as the teacher's responsibility. This aspect of their social and academic experience is explored in more depth in the Discussion section of Chapter Five. For those student participants who did pass, they were able to merge professional and family obligations with their academic ambitions. Furthermore, a lack of time to socialize on campus (i.e., events, activities, lack of peer interaction for mainstream student participants) was a dominant theme from all student participants.

Although the adjunct professor participant and the student participants perceived their worlds from two differing perspectives, more similarities between the adjunct

professor interviewee and the student participants came to light through the tape-recorded interviews. This is a compelling aspect of the study, and is revealed in more depth in the Discussion section of Chapter Five.

*Humanization and dehumanization are real alternatives, only the first is the people's vocation. -Paulo Freire*

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Introduction and Overview**

This proposed research began with the idea that if student and teacher voices were heard through shared learning experiences in the classroom, this study might offer some important findings and salient reasons to warrant support of this type of instructional intervention. This study is a beginning effort toward that end.

Chapter Five provides a summary of the study, conclusions drawn, and a discussion of those conclusions in regard to the gaps in the seminal literature on student persistence and learning communities in two-year institutions. As a preface to the Recommendations section, the Discussion section of Chapter Five is informed by the co-constructivist lens of the researcher as participant observer. In addition to supporting the conclusions in the Discussion section, a final summary will provide closure to Chapter five.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study aimed to understand which attributes of a learning community may lead to greater student persistence where mainstream and non-mainstream students were enrolled together in the same credit-bearing course, and non-mainstream students were enrolled in a non-credit bearing developmental course concurrently.

The focus of the study brought forth student perceptions from both groups about their academic and socialization experiences inside and outside the mainstream and non-

mainstream classrooms. Other comparisons were drawn including successful course completion plus persistence into fall.

### **Research Questions**

Two major research questions guided this study:

1. Which features of a learning community promote student persistence at a two-year institution during one semester of study?
2. Among students and faculty in this particular linked courses model, are there aspects of student experiences that appear to distinguish those who complete their coursework with a passing grade of “C” or better from those who fail or drop out?

Five sub-qualifiers below were chosen to provide a sound conceptual framework to explore features of a learning community:

1. To what extent did student interaction with faculty and their peers, inside and outside of class, play a role in the student’s involvement in their learning?
2. How did collaborative classroom assignments or projects promote shared inquiry, shared knowledge, and intellectual richness?
3. To what extent did students and faculty report satisfaction and success in the learning environment?
4. How did student perceptions of their learning environment shape their affective and cognitive behaviors?
5. How were features of this particular learning community, as reported by teachers and students, reflected in the learning community model adopted by the institution?

## **Review of the Literature**

Chapter two offered an overview and critique of the extensive fields of research in student persistence, developmental education, and learning communities. The gap in the research in the field of learning communities in developmental education was highlighted. In addition, similar philosophical underpinnings between the goals of developmental education and learning communities were discussed.

The positive net effects of learning communities on student persistence in two-year institutions are not wholly understood. Furthermore, less of the seminal research in higher education is available on student persistence in an academic setting for both two- and four-year institutions (Tinto, 1997). Evidence about how student persistence is shaped by the classroom experience within the learning community model is not conclusive.

An increasing challenge is the lack of seminal research on overall program effectiveness in community colleges (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). However, scholars have investigated numerous case studies on overall program effectiveness at many community colleges, which have proven to be useful (2005). The downside is that most of these studies have been conducted at single institutions, which impacts generalizability, making the environment a constant rather than a variable (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Astin & Panos, 1969). Impressive and useful results oftentimes are not properly peer-reviewed, and PowerPoint presentations sometimes become the vehicle for dissemination of results at conferences, rather than published articles or books (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). Greater funding and support by statewide policy makers and

leaders for longitudinal studies in two-year institutions, and constituents of the community college demanding reliable and accurate results will begin to address the challenge of unpublished works (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005).

Furthermore, the background and significance of the seminal research on persistence in two-year institutions and gaps in the literature are noteworthy. Two-year institutions have been overlooked largely in the seminal research on student persistence and retention in higher education (Voorhees, 1987; Ross, 1992; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983). Because the theoretical construct of Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1994) departure model, among others, rely on academic and social integration of a traditional full-time university student, their predictive powers may be less adequate, appropriate, and salient to the non-traditional socialization features of part-time or under-prepared students that attend two-year institutions (Voorhees, 1987; Ross, 1992; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983). Voorhees (1987) asserts "no conceptual models of student persistence behavior have been advanced, designed specifically for the two-year college setting, which account for how students interact within the community college environment" (p. 115). The socio-economic backgrounds, demographic influences and goals of a typical community college student differ from a typical full-time university enrollee. This is true because part-time students are generally minority, older, female, require remediation, and devote long hours to support their families financially. Other researchers have emphasized Tinto and Astin's models lack validity (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1977; Mohammadi, 1996; Rendon, 1994; Choy, 2001) because the model does not allow for



socio-economic background, race, disadvantaged backgrounds, and first-generation college students.

It should be noted that much research and literature are devoted to how learning communities can address social isolation and fragmentation of students of color (Laufgraben Levine & Shapiro, 2004; Shapiro & Levine, 1999), which reinforce how learning communities and the ideals of social and academic integration can be achieved, but on a smaller scale for commuter students in the classroom.

A number of barriers exist for community college students to participate in learning communities that should be recognized. Part-time community college students may pose the greatest challenge for learning communities because they need to be on campus for greater lengths of time, and this requirement is difficult to meet with scheduling pressures. Paradoxically, Bailey & Alfonso (2005) and Lenning & Ebbers (1999) argue that a learning community may be one of the most important resources a community college can offer part-time students because it is the sole connection students have to the institution, despite the fact that “students today are so busy with outside jobs, family care, and other activities, [it] is difficult for learning communities—which are necessary for the best learning—to form spontaneously” (p. 2).

However, the ideals set forth through Astin’s (1984) involvement theory and the power of learning communities do suggest strongly that faculty-student interaction in the classroom has strong linkages to the students’ involvement. Shared inquiry and heightened interaction are intended consequences to that end. Learning communities can

provide these conditions in a way that can encourage students, peers, and faculty alike to promote academic growth.

As the review of the literature revealed, developmental studies programs should offer support toward cognitive, affective, and academic growth of the student (Roueche & Roueche, 1999). A more holistic approach to education, including attention to affective and cognitive behaviors, and mental well-being are all important considerations toward student engagement and student success. Learning communities share these mutual goals to support the students' cognitive and affective behaviors. For students and teachers, learning communities promote increased interaction, socialization, and greater cohesion by promoting integration of the curriculum in a collaborative setting (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Low faculty morale and isolation can improve when teachers collaborate on curriculum design and integrated lesson plans, giving them a new sense of purpose (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Likewise, when executed properly, learning communities can be some of the most rewarding work in higher education (Hill, 1985). Palmer (1999) and Schneider & Schoenberg (1999) suggest it contributes toward educational renewal. Recent studies demonstrate promising results in particular for students in developmental learning communities (Tinto, 2007; Bloom & Sommo, 2005; Tinto, 1998; Choitz, 2006; Killacky, Thomas, & Accomando, 2002; Barefoot, 2005; Raftery & VanWagoner, 2002; Malnarich, 2005).

Ultimately, the basic elements and features that comprise a learning community model may contribute toward higher rates of course completion in developmental studies programs at two-year institutions. This type of qualitative participant study research is

important because a community college's open-door mission, promising access for all, allows for greater numbers of students to enter under-prepared into postsecondary institutions.

### **Findings**

Dominant themes emerged from the findings presented in Chapter Four that arose from perceptions interviewees held about their socialization and academic experiences inside and outside the classroom. A summary of the themes within that context is reported below.

#### *Social Involvement*

The most prominent theme from both mainstream and non-mainstream student interviewees demonstrated few socialization opportunities. This included campus groups, activities, or events and limited peer interactions outside of class due to hectic schedules and/or family obligations. In particular, this was true for the adult mainstream student participants who had families in addition to working part-time. The small exception involved three younger non-mainstream student participants who became friends and would occasionally "hang out" together to study or socialize. They lived far away from each another so their time was limited as well.

Another major socialization theme for both mainstream and non-mainstream student participants was in the realm of affective behaviors: both groups of student participants felt intimidated and reluctant to speak up in the mainstream classroom based on their self-perceptions of potentially embarrassing themselves in front of their peers for a variety of reasons. A third motif was how much more comfortable non-mainstream

(developmental) students felt in their developmental reading class where only eight students were enrolled. With regard to the three non-mainstream student participants who created a social network that revolved around friendships and studying together when possible, each sought out one another to be successful in the academic environment. They expressed strong congruence that their ability to form these relationships was a direct result of the smaller cohort environment, a strong feature of learning communities.

Conversely, all mainstream student participants did not socialize like their non-mainstream counterparts in this fashion, according to their perceptions and descriptions of personal obligations and work. More important, they studied alone, yet the majority emphasized the learning labs as a critical success factor for their academic success, in particular for tutoring in math and freshman English composition.

#### *Academic Involvement*

For both groups, participant students who passed with a “C” or higher demonstrated what the researcher called an “economy of ambition.” This attribute was characterized by a flexible and adaptive approach to bridge their academic and personal lives. Personal traits from an affective behavioral perspective included determination, being goal-oriented, and adaptive in an environment where personal and academic schedules intersect. Learning labs emerged as an ideal learning community for the older adult female mainstream interviewees and the part-time mainstream instructor participant. With regard to satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the learning environment(s), the majority of student interviewees, overwhelming so, wanted more

activities and assignments given in class to promote learning and engagement.

Therefore, the desire for less lecture and more hands-on learning became a recurring motif throughout the course of the interviews.

Course and performance expectations described by the majority of student interviewees revealed certain expectations from the instructor. One pervasive theme was the inability for the instruction to explain the course material in a way the majority of student interviewees could understand readily. This included the notion that an exam would not have any new material outside of the chapter summary handouts, however. The instructor, on more than one occasion during class time, emphasized reading the textbook because the exam would pose questions and refer to material outside the handouts that she had circulated.

The adjunct professor participant acknowledged her own expectations being lowered due to higher rates of absenteeism and lower student participation levels in her class. In addition, she observed that the majority of students in the mainstream psychology class did not take the initiative to visit her during office hours if they were having problems. On the other hand, the non-mainstream student participants had higher expectations for the developmental reading class, in particular, an expectation that the reinforcement of learning through shared content and skills from the psychology textbook would help them to perform better academically. Non-mainstream student participants in the developmental reading class expressed how the lack of having this reinforcement played a role in their overall dissatisfaction, which may have contributed to lower academic performance in the mainstream course.

## **Discussion of Findings**

This section supports conclusions from implications rendered from the findings and relates those to the relevant literature from Chapter Two presented again in Chapter Five with an additional focus on the lack of research on learning communities in a developmental setting. The Discussion section is organized according to the major research questions posed, in addition to the five sub-qualifiers or indicators that provided a sound framework to explore positive features of a linked courses model learning community.

This preliminary exploration of which features of a linked courses model foster student persistence may appear to be limited, yet it is important to consider how little research is conducted on learning communities in a developmental setting for two-year institutions.

It is important equally to consider how these particular 14 community college student participants represent aspects of a typical community college profile. Although the study's narrow construct underscores the inherent limitations to such a small sample size, the findings are consistent with some criticism on persistence models in higher education.

And, at the same time, 14 student voices in this study reflect a range of age, ethnicity, insights, and experiences from their perspectives. Furthermore, these views bring to light the desire the majority of the student participants had to want to learn actively, which is closely aligned and congruent with the literature on student involvement, persistence, and learning communities.

Finally, findings highlight where all the elements of the learning community converge: the classroom environment. The classroom is the intersection where student, peer, and faculty involvement and collective effort play out. Understanding how these relationships can foster student success is strongly supported in the literature.

#### *Research Question #1*

Chapter Four presented findings to the first research question: Which features of a learning community promote student persistence at a two-year institution during one semester of study? This was explored in more depth by specific indicators or sub-qualifiers, which are reported below.

#### *Indicator #1*

The importance of student interaction with peers inside and outside the classroom that promoted students' involvement (Astin, 1984, 1987) in their learning was clearly defined by the non-mainstream participants who developed relationships in the smaller classroom cohort. Certain positive results were:

- Closer connections that allowed for them to establish friendships
- Conditions that promoted studying together outside of class
- Positive peer influences that may have contributed to their overall academic success in both classes
- Social network that may have helped these particular students cope with additional stress or non-support at home (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

These findings are congruent with recent thinking and literature on this aspect of learning communities, heightened peer interaction (Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Gabelnick, et al., 1990). In addition, the pervasive feeling from the

majority of non-mainstream student participants who were enrolled in the developmental course supported the most recent research on learning communities for developmental students and the power of this aspect of learning communities (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Tinto, 1998b).

Furthermore, the majority of non-mainstream participants expressed strongly that without the added feature of closer peer interaction present in the classroom, these bonds would not have been established. In particular, two student participants' experiences reinforced how each one perceived the importance of their peers' influences on their own personal investment toward educational goals. Although far from conclusive, these data align with the effect of peer interaction on one's educational aspirations, which has its grounding in features of socialization (McKormick, 1997).

One non-mainstream participant's perspective was especially poignant. She shared the following observation about her peer saying that "She's from another country and I can learn from her...it's something I want her to rub off on me...so that's what I tend to do with friendships." Another non-mainstream student participant relayed how one of her peers in the learning community was "my role model, she's really smart, and I always ask her, 'How do you do it?'" Through self-direction and personal effort within the smaller classroom dynamic, students helped to actualize and create conditions to improve their overall learning experience. Likewise, Astin (1987) and Tinto (1997) underpin the notion of a shared and connected learning experience with peers positively affecting student performance.



Finally, the majority of non-mainstream students' voices resounded in favor of the smaller learning environment because it made them feel "comfortable" and "at ease" to "share experiences." These data are aligned with a growing body of research that suggests the psychological and emotional needs of the student can be managed within the collaborative learning model (Tinto, Goodsell, & Russo, 1993; Tinto, Goodsell Love, & Russo, 1994).

#### *Indicator #2*

The importance of student interaction with faculty inside and outside the classroom that promoted students' involvement in their learning was clearly defined by the prevailing responses from student participants that both mainstream and non-mainstream adjunct instructors were available. Outside contact with the mainstream adjunct professor helped several student participants to understand how to take exams and improve their overall study habits. This availability is supported in the literature as linked directly to greater student development and involvement in learning, which can increase the overall likelihood of persistence (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Tinto, 1997).

With the exception of a couple of student participants, interviewees overwhelmingly gave glowing remarks about how both teachers were available if they needed them. One student participant noted that "I haven't really gone for help, but I know she's [the mainstream instructor] there if I need her."

The importance of student views with regard to perceived levels of faculty commitment has some established linkages to persistence, which can foster student

persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), but this area of research remains largely inconclusive.

The voice from one mainstream student participant was especially revealing about how much value she placed on visiting with her professor, becoming more academically involved, and improving her ability to pass the course through additional personal effort on her part:

What the deal was, was that the communication wasn't too clear with the instructor and I went to her and we talked and that helped me get myself in line and understand how she operates because on the first test, I failed my first test...but I told her I didn't know how to study for this test, so she went over the information...and I figured out a little process of following along on that.

Another student participant remarked, "I've been helped actually because I went to see her, and she helped me out." These findings, in particular, are congruent with some recent research that highlights the importance of faculty and student contact (CCSSE, 2006) on student engagement, which influences persistence.

The challenge now is to find ways to ensure that these types of data are used by community colleges to understand how "effectively they are engaging their students—and identifying areas for improvement" (CCSSE, 2006, p. 3). In addition, Pascarella & Terenzini (2005) find that students' perceptions of faculty being invested personally in a students' education contributes to a positive and statistically significant net effect on student persistence. Overall, heightened student, peer, and faculty interactions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Astin, 1993) directly support persistence toward completion of a degree while reconstituting academic and social aspects of the traditional classroom (Sanchez, 2004; Minkler, 2002; Matthews, 1986; 1988-1989; Tinto

& Russo, 1994; Lichtenstein 2005, Horn, 2000; Ross, 1992). With regard to the importance of student interaction and participation with faculty inside the classroom, these features are explicated in more depth within the subsequent indicators that focus on the classroom environment itself, which has been generally overlooked in current persistence theories in higher education (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992).

### *Indicator #3*

Collaborative classroom assignments or projects that promoted shared inquiry, shared knowledge, and intellectual richness were the least present of all of the features of learning communities in this particular linked courses model. In addition, from all of the non-mainstream participants came a pervasive unmet expectation about its effect. One particular student participant's comment distilled her peers' collective disappointment by observing, "I thought it [the effect of the shared content and skills] would be branded in my mind."

What we can conclude from the findings is that this particular critical feature of the learning community was relevant and had meaning for all five non-mainstream student participants who expressed their collective expectation and subsequent disappointment that the shared content and skills were missing. The participant students' expectations offer hope that students want to thrive academically and are willing to make a personal investment to do so.

In addition to missing shared content and skills' feature in the non-mainstream class, there were unmet expectations in the mainstream classroom as well. The willingness of the majority of mainstream and non-mainstream student participants to

express their frustration about (1) a lecture-based teaching approach, (2) content overload, (3) lack of activities and/or homework, and (4) lack of engagement during class suggests that student voices and perspectives are a cornerstone to the co-construction of knowledge in the classroom (Freire, 1970; Cross, 1976).

Even so, a few student participants appreciated the organizational skills of the mainstream faculty participant and liked her lecture-based style of teaching, in particular a student who was educated in a non-Western educational system who was more accustomed to a traditional university classroom setting.

However, there is a wide body of research in the field of pedagogy that supports the majority of the 14 student interviewees' views, and suggests also moving away from teaching students as though they were more spectators than participants (Fischer & Grant, 1983; Nunn, 1996; Freire, 1970) while embracing a learner-centered or discovery-based approach (Marchese, 2000; Spann, 2000; Dewey, 1938). Furthermore, these philosophical underpinnings are strongly supported in the literature for students who require remediation (Roueche & Roueche, 1999; Roueche & Snow, 1977).

Generally speaking, predictors for student learning in the field of higher education (Tinto, 1997) such as the role of pedagogy (e.g., Karplus, 1974; Lawson & Snitgen, 1982; McMillan, 1987) contributed to student participants feeling frustrated and disconnected in the mainstream class, which the participant researcher observed that some students were apathetic or bored, and one student slept regularly.

Bringing activities into the classroom, a second predictor of student learning (Volkwein, King, & Terenzini, 1986) could not be determined because these

pedagogical tools were only marginally present. It should be noted also that views held by a couple of mainstream student participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the idea of collaborative learning because of students loafing off (Seifert, 2006).

The psychology curriculum (Forrest, 1982) and its influence on student learning as a third predictor was presented generally through lectures and the chapter summary handouts that were written by the adjunct professor participant. These were undoubtedly the most useful, meaningful, and popular pedagogical tools for student participants.

Furthermore, what has thus far not been taken into consideration is the expectation the mainstream faculty participant had of her mainstream and non-mainstream students. Finally, her experience with students and their expectations highlight the disconnect that can occur between students and faculty. She noted that “Students wanted to be ‘spoon-fed’ the curriculum,” yet expressed her frustration at the same time about the difficulty in reconciling the rigorous standards of the curriculum with differentiated learning levels of students. What her comments imply is a need for two-year institutions to ensure how and to what extent the standards-based curriculum can be accomplished when credit-bearing and non-credit bearing classes are combined.

#### *Indicator #4*

Levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the learning environment were shared consistently by mainstream and non-mainstream student participants in the mainstream class. A major socialization theme in the mainstream class was a general reluctance on the part of students to engage, participate, and speak up. This persistent

finding from the majority of all student interviewees is aligned with some of the most recent research within programs of learning communities.

Lichtenstein (2005) characterizes positive classroom environments (PCEs) where linked courses models are employed as having an

...emphasis on experiential and active learning...a sense of community and support for academic and social adjustment to college...negative classroom environments were characterized by absence of linkages between the courses, faculty who were detached or critical of students and unable or unwilling to help them with their academic skill acquisition with professors who relied more on lectures. (pp. 347-348)

Furthermore, Lichtenstein (2005) found that the dedication and quality of the teaching (Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2000) were the most significant components to a successful learning community.

The extent to which student behaviors can be altered profoundly within different classroom environments is a compelling aspect of this study. Non-mainstream student participants' abilities to speak up and participate in the smaller cohort were satisfactorily indicated, yet are contrasted sharply against their own lack of participation and reluctance to speak up and participate with their peers in the mainstream class. This pervasive feeling of "fear of being embarrassed or judged" by student participants in the mainstream class is ample evidence to suggest that if features of learning communities are implemented well, students will engage, participate, and become co-constructors (Tinto, 2002) of knowledge through this type of instructional intervention (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

From a behavioral perspective, however, one older adult female mainstream student participant contributed some personal wisdom as to why students and the professor contributed to the silence (Fassinger, 1995) in the classroom with this observation:

I think that students did not speak up much in class because most of them were pretty young and probably have not had enough experiences to share, some are just there to get the course out of the way, and the instructor was quite timid and not always clear in her explanations.

Furthermore, although not a pervasive theme, an interesting satellite perspective was shared from a non-mainstream participant student who mentioned that “I think people rarely introduce themselves to each other, or even if we’re in the elevator there’s a silence, know that I mean? But we all go to school together.”

When students did share and feel comfortable and satisfied, these events could be characterized as the most meaningful collaborative moments the majority of students shared in the mainstream class. These stories often revolved around personal family struggles dealing with manic depression and other psychological disorders. One non-participant in the class relayed her level of frustration when her mother would go off her medication for bi-polar disorder, and how devastating that was to her and her siblings until her mother was stabilized again. This kind of generosity would inspire or draw out other testimonials about alcoholism, obsessive-compulsive disorder, but this was the exception not the norm. According to direct observation by the participant researcher, the mainstream faculty participant would share also some of her own personal struggles,

but these discussions did not venture beyond the exposure phase of cognitive growth to higher critical thinking skills such as synthesis of knowledge (Bloom, 1956).

In addition to appreciation of peer stories and shared experiences, another area of satisfaction for faculty and students was the learning labs. Learning labs were an important theme in this study, in particular for the older adult female mainstream student participants and the mainstream faculty participant. The instructor participant's additional experience and time invested in the learning labs contrasted against her classroom teaching is a compelling aspect of this study. She characterized the importance of one-on-one relationships in teaching (Lerner, 1976) with a wide range of students in the learning labs as being the ideal learning community:

Students can work at their own pace...Students don't feel shy to ask questions in the lab because they know that's the place where they are supposed to go for help...so the stigma of feeling inadequate is removed.

Tutoring, in terms of an instructional tool, is a counterpoint to learning communities as they are defined in the literature; however, the two approaches share mutual goals. It is ironic that the mainstream adjunct instructor participant was sensitive to this aspect of student's affective needs in the learning labs, but was unable to either recognize or cope with this aspect of the overall classroom dynamic in a larger group setting, which is addressed in the following indicator.

#### *Indicator #5*

How affective and cognitive behaviors were shaped by the classroom environment embodied several important themes in this study. Several aspects of the classroom environment (i.e., pedagogy, curriculum, and activities) were analyzed



previously due to the intertwinement and complexity of the relationship between teachers and students in the classroom (McKeachie, 1994). A provocative aspect of this study was how the manifestation of affective and cognitive needs not being met reinforced the pervasive feelings of intimidation. Being “embarrassed,” “shy” or uncomfortable in the mainstream environment eclipsed certain affective behaviors, which would naturally have led to better cognitive growth and critical thinking skills (Bloom, 1956; Moore, 2006; Panos, 1973).

Specifically, affective behaviors from the simplest level to the most sophisticated should include being able to participate, react, seek, clarify, contribute, argue, build, formulate, compare, display, and influence in an academic context. The presence and intensity of these attitudes are what is most relevant to the affective domain (Bloom, 1956). Most of these were not present in the mainstream class as was witnessed by the participant observer throughout the semester of study.

The idea of the overall impact on the importance of affective and cognitive behaviors in the classroom is not a new idea, and research conducted in the early 1970s on the purpose and philosophical approach of developmental education (Roueche & Snow, 1977; Boylan, 2002) reinforces how students’ overall psychological and emotional needs are critically important in a learning context. Within that body of research, the philosophical shift from remedial to “developmental” education rejected a deficit model of education (Panos, 1973; Grubb & Associates, 1999) to include affective and cognitive behaviors including mental wellbeing. Roueche & Roueche (1999), Boylan (2002), and Cross (1971, 1976) argue that these elements are all important

considerations toward any meaningful student outcomes and performance, in particular for developmental students.

As a means to cultivate affective and cognitive growth, these considerations not being present as much in the mainstream learning environment would indicate that for any classroom environment to work, conditions must reflect a priority that focuses on students' basic affective needs regardless of pedagogical approach, and apart from a mainstream or non-mainstream environment.

#### *Indicator #6*

Some features of this particular linked courses model were not reflected in the learning community model adopted by the institution, which were indicated strongly by student and faculty participants in this study, and through conversations with other faculty who currently participate in learning communities on different campuses. What these experiences revealed also included a personal observation from the mainstream instructor participant that "I could have been more proactive with my colleague, but since I'm an adjunct and I'm so busy with grading papers and other classes, I don't have the time."

As suggested by Gabelnick et al. (1990), coordination of and work shared with faculty to create learning communities are hallmarks of any collaborative model. This sentiment from the mainstream participant instructor highlights the need for the institution to reevaluate how it defines standards for its program offerings.

In conversations with the participant observer, four faculty expressed consistent views that additional time was needed to "plan, have meetings, email, make phone calls,

and create activities or projects” as essential to their success, in the initial phases of the learning community. However, the majority of these faculty taught in linked courses and course clusters that were all developmental courses and not a hybrid linked courses model. Their actions are strongly supported in the literature. Transitioning from a stand-alone course to a hybrid model is not an easy task, though it is the simplest learning community compared to other typologies. It should be noted that learning communities are characterized by additional time, passion, creativity, planning, and focus (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Laufgraben Levine & Shapiro, 2004).

### *Research Question #2*

Chapter Four presented findings to the second research question: Among students and faculty in this particular linked courses model, are there aspects of student experiences that appear to distinguish those who complete their coursework with a passing grade of “C” or better from those who fail or drop-out?

To suggest that non-mainstream students persisted better than their mainstream counterparts because of their participation in the developmental reading cohort is beyond the scope of this study. This study is far too limited in scope to conclude also that mainstream students persisted better than their peers because they did not need to enroll in a developmental (remedial) reading class. Regarding academic performance, student participants fared almost exactly the same. Sixty six percent of mainstream student participants passed, and 60% of non-mainstream student participants passed the psychology course.

To draw hard conclusions about why students failed, dropped-out or persisted can be attributed to an almost infinite number of variables. Yet, a compelling question throughout the research was, “Why were some students able to excel while others failed?” This is a complex question, which will be dealt with first by providing a brief scan of what the mainstream classroom priorities were in terms of student development and learning, important indicators toward persistence (Tinto, 1997).

From direct observations by the researcher made in the classroom throughout the semester, students and the participant instructor were less interested in the exchange of ideas or synthesizing knowledge (Bloom, 1956), and were more interested in hearing personal stories, including anecdotes occasionally from the mainstream participant instructor. Both student participants and the faculty participant seemed motivated to get to the bottom line, which included lectures to expose students to the new material and consistent exam preparation through several reviews and chapter handouts. This was marked by a certain level of pragmatism toward meeting the basic requirements of the course. Class time was devoted to achieving these specific goals.

Student assessment revolved around traditional methods of testing and measurement whose effect translated to limited assessment of student participants’ cognitive and affective growth, an important consideration when student outcomes are being measured, in particular for developmental students (Boylan, 2002; Roueche & Roueche, 1999), despite the fact that some of their peers were mainstream students.

Furthermore, to consider certain aspects of student participant experiences that may distinguish one from the other regarding academic performance, it should be noted

that certain similarities characterized both groups with regard to how they presented themselves in the interviews. The majority of views expressed by student participants who passed and who did not pass were characterized by less interest in discussing the actual subject matter of what they were learning. The majority of student interviewees were interested in discussions on their personal trials and tribulations, providing compliments or suggestions to improve delivery and learning of the material in the mainstream class with phrases such as, “I hate her lectures,” “I wish we would do more review,” “I didn’t understand the first test,” “Give us some assignments, or homework...we’re not comprehending,” “I really like her stories,” “The handouts are great,” and “The instructor is really organized and I’d recommend her to anyone.” This was evidenced when the participant observer/researcher would ask student participants what they were learning. Only a few student participants could answer this question using psychology terms or providing an overview of what concepts were being discussed.

Student participants’ paths diverged when asked what grade they expected to receive in the psychology course. Student participants were asked by the researcher, “What grade do you expect to get in this class?” For the majority of student participants who passed (with the exception of two classic over-achievers), their responses were characterized by phrases like, “I’m aiming for a B,” “I’m going for a B,” and “I expect to get “B”, an “85,” and “Literally, a 70.” Four of the five student participants who did not pass responded with phrases like, “I’m hoping for a “C,” I’m hoping for a high C,” “Right now the only thing I can go for is the C.”

Although highly limited due to the narrow construct of this study, we can conclude that student participants who passed had a more confident and less tentative impression of how they see themselves succeeding academically compared to their counterparts who did not pass. For the student participants who did not pass their descriptive language (as indicated above) and demeanor in the interviews were expressed with less confidence.

In sum, in addition to consistent study habits and strong organizational skills, the majority of student participants who passed were able to picture themselves being successful academically by setting realistic goals through a personal investment in their learning (Tinto, 1997).

Although narrow in scope due to the de-limitations of this study, academic success for the majority of these particular student participants who passed is in direct proportion to a flexible and adaptive ability to juggle educational aspirations and consistent study habits with complicated personal and professional lives, or what the researcher identified as an economy of ambition.

An economy of ambition is not supported directly in the literature as such, but this particular aspect of student participant experience sets them apart from their student participant peers who failed. This difference is notable from some of the student participants who failed, given their murky descriptions of personal study habits, an inability to study, plus the additional stress from jobs or family obligations. Three of the five student participants who did not pass expressed their frustration with comments like, “One of my biggest challenges is studying...homework and studying is what is

really hard for me,” “I can’t retain anything,” and “My study habits are horrible...I’m trying to change it, but they’re horrible.” Conversely, student interviewees who passed the mainstream psychology class give us a glimpse into the hectic yet vibrant nature of the lives of community college students. Their personal investment toward educational aspirations is aligned with the literature on higher gains in learning through student effort (Ory & Braskamp, 1988; Kaufman & Creamer, 1991; Cross, 2006).

What is more, student participants who passed took ownership of their learning (Tinto, 1997). In addition, as mentioned previously, the majority of student participants who passed consistently described an ability to negotiate their specific two-year institutional environment. In particular, one mainstream participant older female remarked, “I’m always studying when I’m not in school, but I have to take care of my mom who lives with me and get supper on the table for the kids after I get off of work.” This aspect of community college students’ lives renders a portrait of the community college student (CCSSE, 2005, 2006; London, 1992; Padron, 1992; Voorhees, 1987), a stark contrast to the daily life of a typical university student.

The fact that all mainstream interviewees held little interest or time to study with other peers or seek out groups or activities on campus (the non-mainstream students also did not participate in on campus activities, but three of the five did establish friendships and limited study partnerships) plays an important role in the discovery of how a: (1) new definition of student persistence is needed (Ebbers & Wild, 2002) for two-year institutions, and (2) a modified or new theoretical model (Voorhees, 1987; Ross, 1992; Bailey & Alfonso, 2005) of student persistence should emerge.

These findings and portraits of student participants are aligned with criticism that points to how the typical community college profile is undetected within the most widely disseminated student persistence models (Voorhees, 1987; Ross, 1992; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Rendon, 1992; London, 1992; Padron, 1992).

### **Implications and Conclusions**

Although limited due to the inherently small sample size, certain features of a learning community were more pronounced than others with regard to interviewee perceptions and opinions of what helped them to succeed academically in a developmental environment. Shared content and skills (to reinforce learning) and heightened peer interaction (through the smaller developmental class size) in this particular linked courses model emerged as contributors to academic success and involvement, which may have led to greater persistence.

Findings from this study indicated also a critical need to develop a culture of accountability vs. one of inactive compliance at the programmatic level. From an institutional perspective on student persistence and learning communities, linkages between learning communities and student persistence into the second semester are important and contribute to the overall growing body of research (Tinto & Russo, 1994; Stassen, 2003).

Although limited due to the narrow theoretical constructs of this participant observation study, some student participant interviews revealed shorter-term educational goals influenced by job obligations and having dependents. Compared to students who attend four-year institutions where the majority of research is conducted, the typical



community college profile demonstrates the need to develop a theory of student persistence for two-year institutions.

The following conclusions were drawn from the discussion of the findings clarified above. These conclusions were subject to the de-limitations of this qualitative study.

### *Conclusion #1*

If linked courses models are offered by two-year institutions as a strategy to improve overall retention, then the stated goals of and fidelity to the learning community must be aligned with the overall institutional goals for retention and student success.

If the stated goal of a linked courses model in a two-year institution is defined in its developmental education plan as an instructional intervention to bridge the academic-divide between developmental and mainstream students, then the overall quality within all learning community courses must be consistent and of the same high quality (Lichtenstein, 2005) as the model that was adopted by the institution. Barriers or factors that can easily prevent learning communities from being successful range from improper funding, lack of time, poor coordination of scheduling, lack of faculty buy-in, lack of professional development, and undedicated students (Bauer, 2005).

This overarching goal, to foster retention through learning communities does raise the issue of quality in developmental education programs that place developmental students in credit-bearing courses. Perin (2002) advocates mainstreaming and centralization can be successful if: (1) developmental content and skills are aligned with the college-level curriculum, (2) advising and counseling services are available, (3)

strong coordination between academic departments and developmental education are a priority, and (4) student participation in activities outside of classes is reinforced (e.g., clubs or peer mentoring programs related to the student's major). McClenney (undated) asserts developmental education should create conditions for learning and nonacademic support for students. These standards certainly present challenges for any mainstream instructor who participates in a hybrid model, the least of which is the importance of upholding academic standards that are required for articulation agreements with major universities for transfer purposes. Moreover, community colleges have a pledge to uphold academic standards, yet must live up to their open door mission. This dilemma frames the contradiction between the open door mission of community colleges and upholding rigorous academic standards (Perin, 2006).

Ultimately, good academic support in developmental education programs promotes higher reenrollment and retention rates (Tinto, 1998b). Learning communities can offer a strong social networking feature to promote interpersonal skills, solidarity, cohesiveness, a sense of belonging, and reinforcement of basic affective behaviors that include emotional and psychological needs being met in this particular learning environment (Gabelnick et al., 1990). From an institutional perspective, revitalizing the classroom, coalescing fragmentation, and creating faculty renewal can be addressed while focusing on an institution's particular needs (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999).

### *Conclusion #2*

The nature of the student-teacher relationship in the classroom has intrinsic value with shared expectations that contributes to student success in that environment.

What we can conclude from this complex web of mutually binding elements in the classroom is that any one socialization or academic feature in the classroom cannot be singled out or carry more weight than any other feature present. Thus, academic involvement and student learning are not mutually exclusive enterprises. Business jargon (i.e. inputs, outputs, and outcomes) to assess or evaluate students by educators and practitioners defeats the inherent goals of education because it is “organismic, and everyone involved in it is an organism,” (Lerner, 1976, p.3) intertwined and interdependent upon one another for success in learning.

Furthermore, Lerner (1976) establishes education as “the fluid, incalculable nature” (p. 4) of the teacher-learner experience, placing value on the climate of where education takes place. The climate or culture can be changed because it is a human effort. Thus, these assumptions embedded within this theoretical perspective give priority to the intrinsic elements of successful teaching and learning.

Some complaints and dissatisfaction from both parties were evident, some of which may have been a result of unclear and/or unrealistic expectations. The mainstream instructor participant preferred teaching students who would attend class regularly, read the textbook, study, and perhaps teach students who possessed higher level critical thinking skills; the majority of student participants may have preferred a teacher who could have taught more to their level, but the collective dissatisfaction was characterized by what each (meaning the students and their teacher) thought the other should contribute to the classroom dynamic.

In essence, the inability to manage agreement became an issue of miscommunication and misaligned expectations. The phrase, “Too much!” as was indicated by both the majority of student participants and the faculty participant throughout the interviews could have become a collective goal toward improvement. If both the mainstream participant teacher and her students could have been mutually aware of one another’s collective frustration and expectations, perhaps a more creative, comprehensive, and engaging learning environment would have emerged.

Furthermore, both the mainstream teacher participants and student participants relied upon the chapter summary handouts to get through the material, but for different reasons. All tended to have complicated lives around the school schedule; even the instructor didn’t come to class promptly in the beginning of the semester. Therefore, one of the critical elements to successful teaching and learning in the classroom is collaboration and an atmosphere based on mutual respect and clear expectations (Tinto, 2007).

What we can conclude also is that it is incumbent upon teachers that students learn early from the instructor about what the expectations are to promote their own direct involvement and engagement (Tinto, 2007; Kuh et al., 2005) in the classroom. Tinto’s (2007) latest unpublished research on basic skills learning communities brings to light the importance of upholding high expectations, in particular for academically under-prepared students, plus regular feedback and involvement from faculty and developmental studies programs that deliver this model. The mainstream faculty participant’s classroom efforts to communicate her expectations of students included a

detailed syllabus and explanations of what the expectations were for exams and assignments.

### *Conclusion #3*

A student's level of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the learning environment influences their participation and academic involvement in that classroom setting.

The pervasive feeling from the majority of student participants saw personal involvement and satisfaction in the classroom as the teacher's responsibility. This included providing necessary activities and assignments, being clear about expectations for assignments and the exams, and, most important, adapting the curriculum to the majority of student participant's overall needs. These expectations were reflected in student participants' levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the learning environment.

Thus, we can conclude that if a student feels a certain level of satisfaction in the classroom, then the level of student involvement may increase. This conclusion is reinforced in the literature where a student's involvement and development is linked to the classroom dynamic, which contributes to levels of participation (Nunn, 1996). Non-pedagogical areas that support this particular aspect of the classroom include student-faculty interaction and contact (Endo & Harpel, 1982), peer interaction, and student effort (Tinto, 1997), which also have links to increased persistence.

When executed well, these aspects of the classroom imitate socialization features of a learning community, which may foster and nurture student involvement, leading to overall persistence in the classroom (Tinto, 1998a, 1998b).

#### *Conclusion #4*

The social involvement at the campus-wide level of the typical community college student is not necessarily a priority for them, nor does it unavoidably lead them to a greater likelihood to persist into a subsequent semester of study.

The mainstream and non-mainstream student participants' lack of socialization needs, as defined by Tinto's (1975) model, is a direct result of lives inundated with additional responsibilities, family obligations or jobs. The personal descriptions of professional and family obligations (from the majority of mainstream and non-mainstream student interviewees) revealed that the necessity of social inclusion and coherence, which are socialization features grounded in Tinto's (1975) departure model, is somewhat impractical because their lives are characterized by family dependents, working long hours, being parents or single mothers, and being enrolled in larger numbers part-time. Furthermore, the younger male and female mainstream and non-mainstream students did not have ample amounts of time to spend on campus beyond going to classes.

If this is true, then peer and faculty interaction (Endo & Harpel, 1982) in the classroom becomes a proxy socialization experience in lieu of on-campus events or activities for some community college students. As a result, the classroom environment becomes a unique space on campus for part-time students to develop relationships with teachers and their peers. Therefore, an important reason to support short-term persistence definitions in two-year institutional research is that it places the focus on direct student involvement (Tinto, 1997; Astin, 1984, 1993) in the classroom.

This, in turn, places importance on the interaction between faculty, students, and peers, a strong element to Astin's (1984) involvement theory to promote overall persistence. According to Tinto (1997), focus on student involvement in the classroom has been less of a priority in the seminal research on student persistence, and some researchers would argue that the classroom is the most influential factor where student academic and social integration can occur (1997).

These one-on-one relationships with peers and faculty alike speak to the importance of institutions being able to support and sustain these important personal connections, which will require that stakeholders and the leadership within the institution to provide ample resources to create conditions to that end.

Thus, a future consideration would be to assess how important and present levels of student interaction with faculty and their peers (CCSSE, 2005, 2006) are in a linked courses model contrasted with students enrolled in a stand-alone course. The implication would be that for students who are academically under-prepared and at-risk of dropping out, in particular if they are minority and part-time, making student involvement and engagement a priority for the institution would make teachers and the institution more accountable to student success and learning in the classroom.

Although this study is significantly limited in scope, we can conclude further that the limited relationship community college students have with their campus environments have implications beyond what the theoretical models have assumed for traditional four-year populations (Voorhees, 1987; Ross, 1992; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983).

Along these lines, these assumptions do not consider, for example, minority, under-served and under-prepared students whose enrollments are on the rise (McCabe, 2000; Bailey, 2005; CCSSE, 2006), and whose characteristics represented 50% of the student participants in this study. Nor do the traditional theoretical models consider first-generation students whose numbers are increasing, and whose educational goals may be affected by spanning two cultures where friends and family may reject their new status (Padron 1992; London, 1992). First-generation students are typically minority, women or adults from working class families (Padron, 1992). This generalization was reflected at the individual level in this participant observation study from 50% of the student interviewees.

Moreover, to inform any new theoretical model that would include this type of student profile, as evidenced from the majority of mainstream and non-mainstream participants, a new definition of persistence may be more useful and meaningful (Ebbers & Wild, 2002). Therefore, emphasizing short-term goals such as semester-to-semester persistence or program completion (Crawford, 1999; Walleri, 1981) may yield better and more accurate findings. The two-year institution where this study was conducted is measuring those particular outcomes, but has not collected data on first-generation students, according to a report specialist.

Overall, a criticism of this new definition of persistence suggests that research should follow the student instead of the institution (Adelman, 1999), which means the snapshot approach is misguided because students complete their degrees, not the institution the student attends.



## **Recommendations**

Students' lives and their attendant academic successes can be altered profoundly by a wide spectrum of internal and external influences. Yet, participant observation studies can help interpret findings and improve the quality of questions posed by researchers (Draper, 2006).

Before recommendations are offered, it is worth acknowledging the researcher was influenced from seminal literature in the fields of student persistence, learning communities, and developmental education. This research has been informed by the literature, interviews conducted for this study, and a teaching background in a coordinated studies program for six years that augmented the researcher's ability to make sound recommendations.

The recommendations below are a synthesis of student participant suggestions for improvements, the literature review, findings, and professional experience in the interdisciplinary field.

### *Recommendation #1*

Creation of an operational model of a learning community within the institution with necessary staff development that supports implementation of the model.

The creation of an operational model for a learning community (as an instructional intervention) means identifying factors that create conditions for that success, and which are continually measured and evaluated over time through direct supervision and professional development opportunities.

This implies that all of the features in a learning community, not just one or two, must be utilized to create conditions for gains in learning and gains in persistence concurrently. If the goal is persistence, then student engagement and involvement are a pre-condition to that end. Hence, student involvement and participation is a fulcrum from which the student-faculty relationship is balanced, and this assumption should not mutually exclude the goals of either the student or teacher.

For developmental students in a linked courses model, the classroom environment should be characterized by shared responsibility, shared knowledge, and shared knowing, not just a connection through the linking of course titles (Tinto, 2002; Laufgraben Levine & Shapiro, 2004).

What are the most important factors that can foster overall student persistence during one semester of study? In a linked courses model, students should be able to express ideas and synthesize material learned in multiple ways through common understandings or conceptual statements. Improvements on affective and cognitive behaviors are an important goal to that end. Additionally, faculty should receive the necessary support network from other peers and from the institution to meet certain tasks required in a collaborative model. A faculty member involved in a linked courses model should be able to:

- Provide clear performance expectations and communication of those expectations from teachers to students.
- Create a well-organized curriculum and syllabus that may include integrative features between disciplines.

- Be sensitive to differentiated learning levels, in particular in the mainstream classroom if developmental students are enrolled.
- Create a classroom environment conducive to student responses (i.e., ask for anonymous and regular feedback at the end of each class session) and participation even when subject matter is foreign to students.
- Develop integrated curriculum maps based on thematically related material or overarching concepts to promote cognitive growth and higher order thinking skills of students.
- Reinforce learning through a variety of in-class activities: seminar-like discussions and collaborative assignments that go beyond traditional exams to promote intellectual richness through shared inquiry and the exchange of ideas.

### *Recommendation #2*

Creation of a position of coordinator or supervisor of learning communities within the developmental education program that is visible and known to learning community faculty and can align the goals of any learning community with the model adopted by the institution to the overall mission of the school.

The fidelity by the faculty to the learning community model should be in alignment with the institutional priorities on the campus. Some direct supervision over the learning community models and how they are marketed to the general student population will increase credibility, and help to establish accountability from the program itself by living up to its mission and the school's.

The merits of having a coordinator to oversee and work directly with faculty on curricular design and alignment with the school's mission cannot be overstated, and a full-time position may be necessary depending on the number of offerings of learning

communities because the availability of a full-time faculty member to assume this additional position may be impractical. However, this role could be assumed by a faculty member within the ranks who has seasoned experience in learning communities in the developmental education program, which may provide buy-in from other faculty.

Additionally, the coordinator position could provide leverage to maintain an excellent standard for learning communities on all campuses, and advocate for the necessary resources faculty may need.

It would be important also for the coordinator to help faculty with professional development opportunities that are commensurate with the professional goals of faculty who have chosen to participate in the learning community model(s) adopted by the institution. Mentorship and advocacy from the coordinator would potentially ensure faculty are receiving appropriate resources. Classroom management techniques, curriculum design, and integrated lesson planning are all short-range goals the coordinator could work on with faculty through mentorship and supervision.

Finally, if an institution has a de-centralized developmental studies program, this position could unite the math, reading, and writing departments under a single umbrella department (Roueche & Roueche, 1999; Roueche & Snow, 1977; Boylan, 2002) to create cohesion and streamlining of disparate elements of the instructional programs.

### *Recommendation #3*

Creation of incentives for adjunct and full-time faculty including a paid course-release hour, in addition to a stipend.

The most important reason to implement financial incentives is to demonstrate an action that displays to all stakeholders that learning communities are an important priority for the mission of the school. The institutional acknowledgement could include special awards and recognition of faculty, in addition to the financial incentive. Furthermore, any teacher who volunteers to participate in a learning community should understand the additional level of commitment, time, and energy necessary to implement this type of instructional intervention. A major factor for the promotion of a successful learning community is the level of dedication and familiarity instructors provide. Teachers who do not demonstrate this level of understanding and commitment should be discouraged from participating in this type of collaborative teaching model adopted by the institution.

### *Recommendation #4*

Creation of hubs for social and academic activity in a linked courses model.

In addition to activities and assignments that promote active learning, a restructuring of the traditional classroom's physical environment is advantageous. As such, improving the physical classroom space may lead to greater learning and involvement gains for students.

### *Scenario One*

- Provide tutor(s) working in conjunction with the professor during class time in the learning community. This approach emulates a course clusters (which several exist currently on the campus) type learning community that includes a counselor or advisor who participates in developmental classes, and is available to help students. This added tutelage would be a supplement to the mainstream classroom, but would still be considered a linked courses model. If the developmental reading instructor was available as a tutor, then that individual could attend in lieu of or in addition to other tutors.
- Purchase modular furniture for classrooms instead of long, heavy tables. Light- weight tables can be used separately or put together to have both individual and group interactive learning sessions. This creates a seminar-like atmosphere
- Provide at least one copy of the textbook to be available during class time.
- Invest in smart classrooms and state-of-the-art technology so teachers can incorporate technology and multi-media in the classroom; students should have the option to use laptops in class, as needed, for assignments or projects.

### *Scenario Two*

This second scenario is basically the same as above, only instead of bringing tutors and the learning lab to the classroom, the mainstream instructor would create special time in the learning lab during class where professors and other reading teachers could meet with students who need additional help. For those students who do not require additional help, they could work on class assignments, either in groups, or alone. The reading teacher and/or tutor would provide additional instructional support in the classroom.

### *Recommendation #5*

Conduct evaluative studies at the programmatic level where several different types of instructional interventions may be offered, in addition to case studies on persistence problems for developmental students who are enrolled part-time in two-year institutions.

If the benefits and results from this type of summative evaluation help to ascertain the quality of the instruction and overall success of the program coordination, then student outcomes and success become more relevant to the alignment of these goals. Ultimately, this type of research can help institutions improve the overall quality and consistency of their programs that target a specific student population.

From all the data gathered by the researcher on student persistence for developmental students, the most compelling data are the low numbers of part-time, developmental students graduating with a degree, certification or transfer to a university. According to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board Institutional Effectiveness Measures and Standards for 2005-2006 for this two-year institution, roughly 44% of full-time students receiving remediation will receive their degree, certification or transfer to a university within four years. Yet, for part-time students who require remediation, 22% go on to accomplish their educational goals within seven years.

Although these numbers fare well compared to other two-year institutions, the low course completion rate for part-time students raises some implications: academically under-prepared, part-time students may drop-out in greater numbers because of their inability to make the personal investment as a full-time student, due to job or family

obligations. This scenario may contribute to a sense of isolation from the campus environment (Tinto, 1975), diminishing their educational aspirations and motivation to stay in school.

#### *Recommendation #6*

Develop a new definition of persistence and a new model of student persistence to serve the community college student population.

For the future, community colleges will require an ambitious contribution of research to explain phenomena that can begin to establish predictors of student outcomes and success. A new or modified theoretical model may help institutions to adapt to the needs of different minority and under-served populations, many who are enrolled in developmental courses. A one-size-fits-all approach doesn't necessarily benefit students in institutions of higher learning, so neither should orthodox theoretical perspectives be employed exclusively by researchers or scholars to render judgments, evaluations or assessments to determine how a typical community college student may or may not persist within their academic and social environment. One of the more important reasons to support short-term persistence definitions in two-year institutional research is because it places the focus on student involvement in the classroom, as this study has revealed.

Assuming these older models are no longer salient, new theoretical models can focus on how two-year institutions specifically can understand, target, and familiarize themselves with their older and increasing minority student populations.



## **Summary**

Faculty and students who learn together in the classroom are on an academic and social continuum. What happens in the classroom is as significant to research as are external forces that may prevent students from staying in school. Substantive research in both realms throws some light on the other and offers clarity on which to base comparative analyses.

Not nearly enough attention has been paid to the growth, popularity, and development of learning communities, and studying their meaning for students and faculty may provide us with viable alternatives to classroom learning and teaching. The hub for academic activity is by and large in that environment, and the classroom is a sanctuary for faculty and students to thrive. What teachers and students should share in the classroom are the exchange of ideas and knowledge. When implemented well, learning communities can empower students when they listen, when they think, when they write, read or speak.

Is there any common feature that makes a learning community entice others to use it and join the group? One compelling factor is the collaborative features of learning communities through shared inquiry. Students may feel a certain intellectual boost from delving into the larger thematic concepts that bridge disciplines. Or, potential friendships and social networks may develop, and disgruntled or apathetic faculty may find themselves revitalized. Under what conditions can learning communities thrive? The simple answer is for the institution to provide ample and appropriate resources to support interested and motivated faculty. This includes space for faculty and students,

incentives such as small stipends or paid course- release hours, and ample professional development opportunities.

Learning communities are not without its critics, however. An obvious criticism is displaced levels of effort made by different participants or freeloading from both students and faculty. Another pitfall is the inability for faculty to collaborate successfully because achieving a shared purpose means redefining which parts of the curriculum each teacher deems essential.

If, however, we give voice to student and faculty learning processes and their socially constructed meaning within a learning community, then we begin to understand more clearly the multiple benefits from learning community models, and their ability to foster student learning and faculty performance. Critically important to this end is a continuation of dialogue that urges us to consider that institutions of higher learning stand to gain financially from retaining its students.

This perspective focuses on the need for community colleges, their faculty, and leaders to understand how the quality of academic and social involvement of students in the classroom is not a single endeavor apart from their institutions.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Student Interview Protocol**

#### **Questions with Script for Researcher**

Researcher: First of all, I want you to know how much I appreciate your time today. I am interested in looking at student experiences in a learning community at [institution omitted]. I would like to ask you a few questions about your experiences in these classes. Also, remember that your answers will remain confidential and your name will not be used at any time during the course of our work. Depending on your responses, this interview should take about 60-90 minutes. I am planning on tape recording the interview, in addition to taking notes to make sure I have an accurate record of our conversation, okay? Any questions? All right, let's get started.

- First of all, tell me a little bit about yourself.
  - Where are you from?
  - Do you have a job?
  - What do you do in your free time?
- What was your educational experience before you came to this two-institution??
  - Did you graduate from high school? Have a GED?
- What are your plans after community college?
  - Four-year university? Major?
  - Job?
- Why did you choose to come to this school?
  - Location? Money? Parents?
  - Did your parents growing up value your education?
  - How about for your siblings?
  - How far along did your folks get with their education?
- When did you enroll on this campus?
- What are your goals? Full-time/part-time?
- Other than going to classes, what do you do here?
  - Clubs, organizations, sports, student commons, cafe, gym?
- Tell me about the classes you have taken here
  - This year and previous years
  - Is it your first time in each course?

- What types of things are you learning? Is the material stuff you have seen before or is it all new?
- How are your other classes going?
- Have you had any developmental courses? Are you in one now?
- Do you ever feel bad or embarrassed being in a remedial course?
- Do your peers ever talk about it?
- When will you be done taking developmental classes?
- If a student needs help with their homework, where can they go for help on campus?
- In your classes, if you need help or if you don't understand something, what do you do?
  - When you have done (answer above), what has that experience been like?
- How did you find out about learning communities on this campus?
- Talk to me about your teachers in these two classes, developmental reading and Intro to Psychology.
  - How do they teach the material?
  - How do they establish relationships with students?
  - Are they available outside of class?
  - Do they seem to know what they are talking about? Can you understand what they are saying?
- Do you sense that they are trying to help you? Why / why not?
- Could you describe a typical day in both classes?
  - Please tell me how the material you are reading for both classes benefits your understanding of the subjects you are studying?
  - Opportunities to work with peers and faculty?
  - Have there ever been moments since you enrolled that you have considered dropping out of these classes?
  - What has encouraged you to stay or to leave?
- Tell me about your study habits.
  - How do you prepare for each class?
  - How do you manage homework?
  - How do you prepare for tests?
  - What scores have you gotten thus far?
  - What grade do you expect to get in this class?
  - Where do you study? For how long each day? Alone or with other people?
- What else can you tell me to help me understand your experiences right now in this linked course model?

- Tell me what you feel you have gained from being in these two courses.
  - Tell me how other students in these classes and your teachers influenced your learning or not.
  - Any friendships develop?
  - Can you share any personal growth or changes you have made as a result of this experience?
  - Any negative experiences?
  - Are there any of your peers you might hang out with after the semester is over?
- Overall, tell me some differences between this learning community and other courses you have been enrolled in.
  - Has your participation helped you with finding out where student services are available on campus?
  - More help from faculty?
  - Would you recommend to your friends taking these types of classes?
  - Will you enroll in a learning community in the future?
- Please tell me some suggestions to improve these classes for the future.
- What else can you tell me to help me understand your experiences this semester in these two courses?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Faculty Interview Protocol**

- First of all, tell me a little bit about yourself.
  - Where are you from?
  - How long have you worked at this institution?
  - Have you worked at other community colleges?
  - What do you do in your free time?
- What is your educational background?
- Why did you choose to work here?
  - How long have you been at this institution?
  - Full- or part-time?
  - Commute time?
- Tell me about all the classes you teach on this campus or other campuses.
  - This year and previous years
  - How long have you taught developmental classes?
  - How are your current classes going?
- Tell me about your pedagogical approach and educational philosophy.
  - Has it changed over the years?
  - Your relationship to students?
  - Your peers?
- If a student needs help with their homework, where can they go for help on campus?
- If a faculty member needs mentorship, where can they go for help in the learning community?
- Could you describe a typical day in the learning community?
  - Tell me about how you plan and structure activities, assignments, and class projects.
  - Tell me about activities and assignments that work.
  - Describe the nature or frequency of faculty and peer interaction in and outside this particular linked courses model.
- Describe the time commitment in this linked courses model.
  - How long have you taught in a learning community?
  - Where did you obtain information and resources to teach in a learning community?

- Describe features of a learning community that help you as a teacher.
  - And additional information about the linked courses model?
- How do you decide as a teacher what activities reinforce strong learning episodes for the student?
  - What qualities, characteristics, or abilities do you seek to develop in a student?
  - What qualities, characteristics, or abilities do you seek to develop in yourself?
- As a result of your experiences, describe how participating in this learning community model has impacted your teaching and learning experience.
  - Would you recommend to other faculty teaching in a learning community?
  - What differences, if any, would you speculate on between faculty who teach in a linked courses model, and those who do not?
  - As you continue to teach in a learning community, describe your experiences and growth as a teacher.
  - Tell me specifically what aspects of these two courses being combined worked and what didn't?
  - Describe why or why not you may continue to teach in a learning community.
- Describe resources made available to you, as a faculty member on this campus that helped you design, coordinate, plan and implement this particular learning community model.
  - Tell me how the institution has disseminated information about learning communities to the student and faculty populations.
  - Can you make some suggestions to improve learning communities on this campus?
- What else can you tell me to help me understand your experiences as a faculty member this semester teaching in this linked courses model?

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Institutional Effectiveness Measures for Developmental and Non-Developmental Students Plus State-Wide Percentages**

The overall development education enrollment as of February 28<sup>th</sup> for the spring semester 2007 was an unduplicated headcount of 6,746. The breakdown into disciplines is as follows: 5,599 students were enrolled in three developmental levels of math, 665 students were enrolled in three levels of developmental reading, and 492 students were enrolled in three levels of developmental writing. For the exit-level reading course, which was the subject of this study, 457 students were enrolled in these classes.

From the institution's Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Accountability, the following results of student retention effectiveness measures are reported below for Academic Year 2005-2006.

For part-time, FTIC students (Fall 2003) who returned the following Spring out of a fall enrollment of 2,683, 64% returned to the institution, which is 2 percentage points less than the state average.

For part-time, FTIC students (Fall 2003) who received remediation in the Fall and who returned the following Spring out of an enrollment of 1,549, 65% returned, which is one percentage point greater than the statewide average.

For part-time, FTIC students (Fall 2003) who did not receive remediation in the Fall and who returned the following Spring out of an enrollment of 1,134, 63% returned, which is five percentage points less than the statewide average.



Of the total FTIC fall 2003 Cohort of 5,867 students, 64% returned in the spring of 2004, which did not exceed the state average of 71%. By Ethnicity, the same cohort met the statewide rates except for Hispanic and White student cohorts.

For full-time, FTIC students (Fall 2003) who returned the following Spring out of an enrollment of 1,998, 75% returned, which is three percentage points less than the statewide average.

For full-time, FTIC students (Fall 2003) who received remediation in the Fall and returned the following Spring out of an enrollment of 774, 78% returned, which is the statewide average.

For full-time, FTIC students (Fall 2003) who did not receive remediation in the Fall and who returned the following Spring out of an enrollment of 1, 224, 74% returned, which is five percentage points less than the statewide average.

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## VITA

Over the past twenty years, Rosemary Reynolds-Sundet has cultivated a varied professional career as a teacher, administrator, fundraiser, concert producer and orchestral musician. Living and working abroad for many years in Portugal, Mexico, and Spain enhanced her skills in diplomacy and respect for other cultures. While living in Portugal, she maintained a career as professional oboist, music instructor and volunteer for the Mai-Lis Foundation, a not-for-profit organization devoted to raising money for refugees from Angola and Mozambique, former colonies of Portugal. She is fluent in Portuguese and Spanish. Her additional varied experiences range from her two-year appointment in 1990 as principal oboist for the Filarmónica del Bajío in Guanajuato, Mexico, and Professor of Music at the Universidad de Guanajuato, to organizing the first fundraising event in Guanajuato that brought together artists, musicians, and business entrepreneurs to benefit the local orphanage. Returning to the United States in 1998, in addition to teaching and conducting, she held a six-year tenure as Dean of Performing Arts at Ross School, a private K-12 school in East Hampton, Long Island, New York, where she collaborated with Harvard University on the “Globalization in Education” project led by Marcelo Suarez-Orozco, Professor of Globalization and Education at NYU. In July of 2001, she was Producer for *Sonic Convergence*, a world premier cross-cultural concert with Quincy Jones conducting. As a strong advocate of the arts, Rosemary founded *Visions of the East End*, a contemporary series on Long Island that featured music and plays of local composers & playwrights. A recipient of the Presidential Scholarship Award in 1983, Rosemary holds a Bachelor’s degree in music from the University of New Mexico, a master’s degree in music from the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and she is currently a doctorate candidate in Educational Administration at the University of Texas at Austin in the Community College Leadership Program. In 2004, she was guest lecturer at Dowling College in Oakdale, New York, on the topic of transformational and charismatic leadership in K-12 schools. In 2000, Rosemary was guest speaker at the Music Teacher’s National Convention (MTNC) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on the topic of integrated

curriculum and multi-media uses in the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom. As an Austin resident, Rosemary has volunteered with the Capital Food Bank and the Special Olympics. She is a native of New Mexico.

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This dissertation was typed by Rosemary Reynolds-Sundet and converted into the University of Texas at Austin dissertation template format by Sarah Cale.